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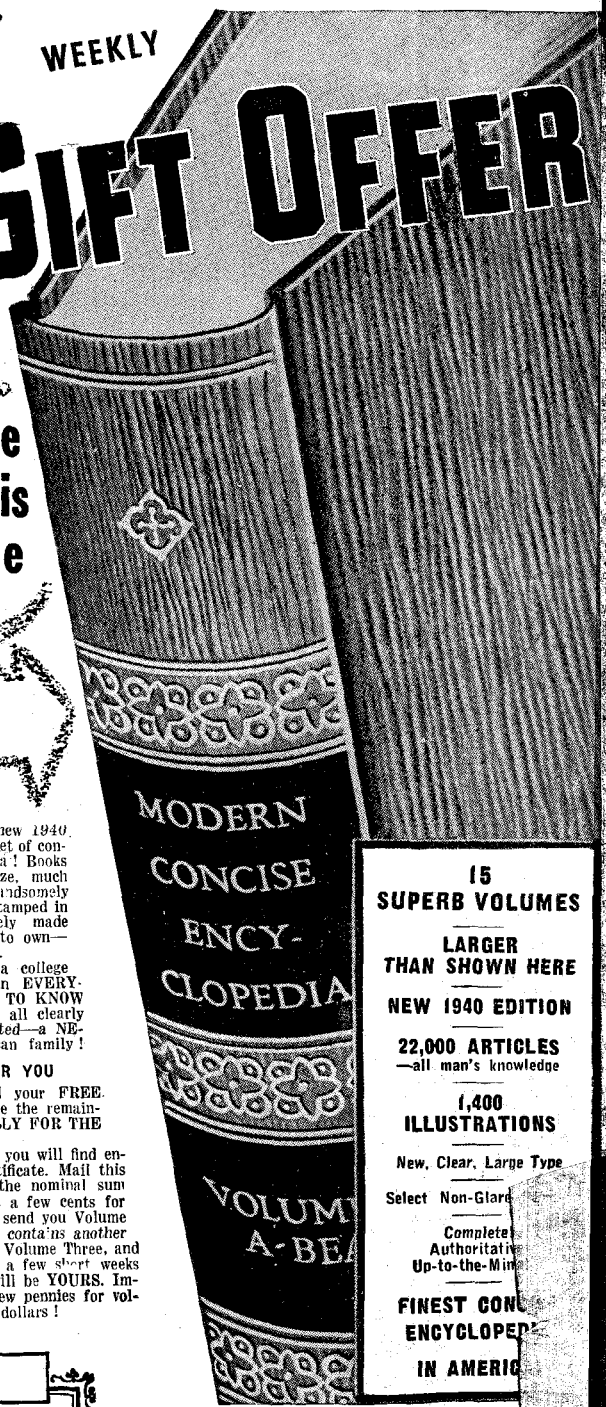

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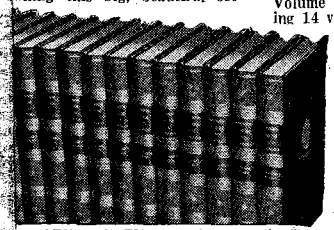

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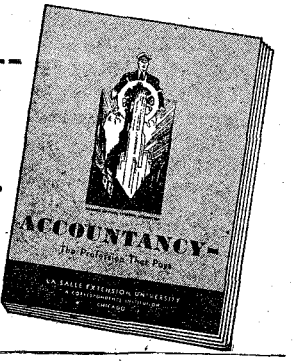

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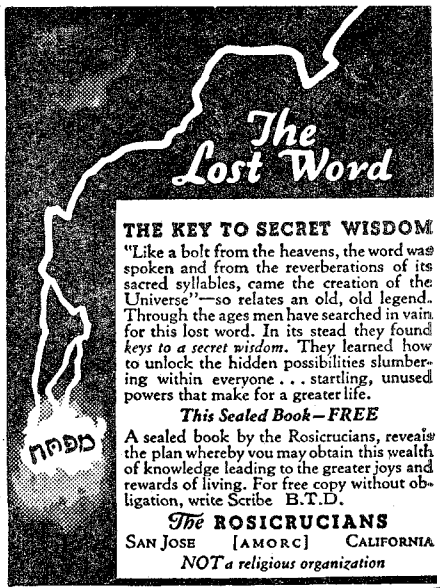

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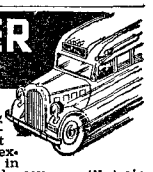

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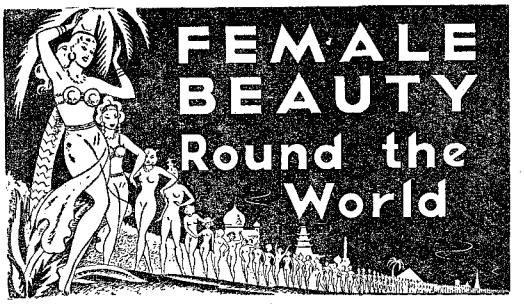

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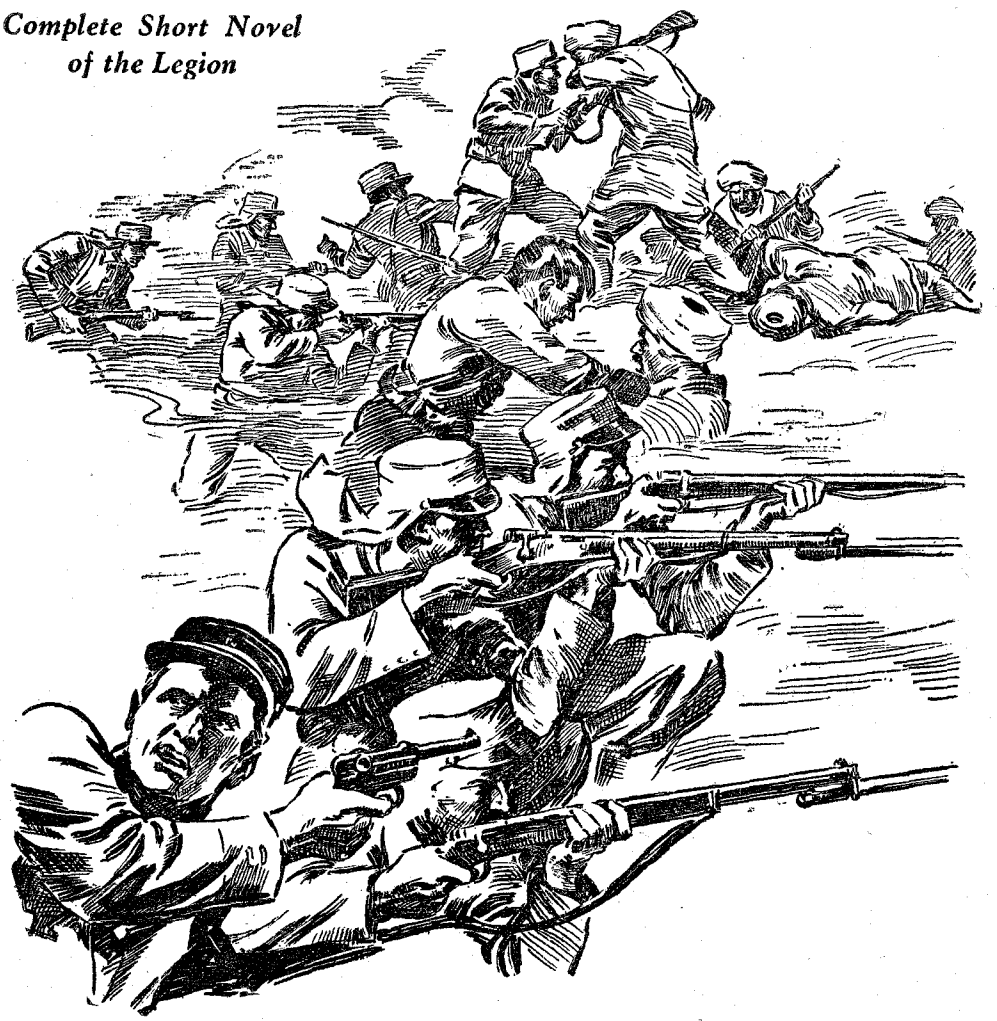

All Survivors Report

By GEORGES SURDEZ

Author of "The Blood Call," "A Family Council," etc.

CHAPTER I

DETAIL TO ANGER

"ALL sentries will be doubled and changed ever hour. We shall eat cold rations, and we must light no fires." The lieutenant commanding the mounted detachment was giving the instructions for the night. "There is a probability that they do not know we are after them and we must not advertise our presence out here."

Raynal watched his friend as he stood before the long lines of Legionnaires. His tall silhouette was trim and athletic in the white uniform, his braid glittered.

The old admiration stirred in him: Dumanoir was big and handsome, with

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fine, strong features, a boyish grin and the contrast between his light blond hair and the deep tan. Yes, he was surely very brave, and as certainly too reckless.

Not only was there no probability that the Saharan raiders they were following did not know of their presence, but there was no possibility. Nearly eighty men, more than two scores of mules, and six horses in this detachment.

The mules had brayed, would bray; the horses had neighed, would neigh. In the emptiness of the desert, sounds carry very far, even for European ears.

And a raiding band never failed to leave scouts several hours' journey behind the main body. It was stupid to think that none of those keen-eyed, experienced tribesmen had detected a numerous detachment of Europeans advancing openly on their trail.

But that was Dumanoir: he believed intensely in anything he wanted to believe. What was odd was that the Legionnaires, among whom were many who had served in the Sahara for years, listened to him with every appearance of trust. Even Sub-lieutenant Vernier, the leathery, matter-of-fact subaltern of thirty-four, appeared to accept what was said.

Odd? Not at all. Raynal had always seen this occur. Dumanoir, a graduate of St. Cyr Military School, had an orator's magnetism. He could convince himself of anything and then convince others. Last night, for instance, he had outlined his plan on the map—touched a pencil's tip here and there:

"We camp there tomorrow night; and the following morning, we catch them loading at the Tizza Wells and knock the spots off them."

Twice in two years, Dumanoir had succeeded in such ventures. Raynal, who had been his classmate at the school, who had

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come into the Foreign Legion with him, had had doubts on both occasions. But Dumanoir had bent fate with his strong hands, and they had emerged victorious, to obtain rewards.

The hitching chains were stretched between the stakes, the animals fastened to them. No tents were put up. Night was growing swiftly, and the jagged hills to the west were black fangs against the flaming sky.

There was a breath-taking stillness in the atmosphere. Raynal was almost suffocated by a premonition of disaster. But no one else appeared in the least worried.

Vernier was placing the sentries, two by two, as instructed. Dumanoir, who had lighted a cigarette, watched him, ignoring the lieutenant at his side: Raynal, almost as tall, less compactly built, a dark, long-limbed young man. He was smiling, but the tiny muscles moving on his jaws showed that he was displeased at something, and he was sulking.

"Sentries placed, *mon lieutenant.*" The sub-lieutenant returned, saluted: "The sergeants have their schedules for the changes."

Raynal scanned his hard face carefully, for a trace of doubt. But Vernier was hiding nothing. He trusted his chief's word against his own judgment, his common sense.

For Vernier, who had been on several Saharan missions, to Taoudeni, to Kidal, to Timbuktu, must be aware that a raiding band could not be surprised by a European detachment of this size. But like all others he was fascinated by Dumanoir's reputation for success, by the array of ribbons won in twenty-three months of service.

"All right, Vernier. Let's eat," said Dumanoir.

THE orderlies had prepared the sleeping bags of the officers, in the center of the camp. A cold meal was set out on a cloth laid on the sand, cold meats, bread, wine, canned peaches. Dumanoir ate heartily heedless of the gritting under his teeth. As soon as he had finished, the map reappeared.

"The well is only twenty-one kilometers away. We start off at three, sharp. Maximum speed for three hours, and we are within attacking distance. We drop off the animals under proper guard here"—he indicated the spot—"out of range. We split into two detachments, one approaching at an angle, thus; the other progressing so as to cut off their retreat—"

"There are at least seventy of them," Raynal objected. "They have Mauser rifles. The cartridges we picked up, dropped by their hunters, show that."

"Listen, *mon vieux*"—Dumanoir's face could not be seen in the increasing darkness, but his shrug of impatience was plain—"our scouts picked up two shells dropped by a hunting party. But did it ever occur to you that the men sent out to hunt game would be armed with the best weapons in the outfit?

"Two empty shells may mean one Mauser as easily as seventy. Suppose they do have Mausers? Does that mean we let them go by? We match them in numbers and we're as good as they are."

"As long as we have water, yes."

"We have enough for thirty-six hours. Long before that, we can refill at the well."

"If we get to the well," Raynal said. "Vernier, what do you think?"

"I?" Vernier was embarrassed by the direct question. "Well—we'll need a bit of luck, at that. But Lieutenant Dumanoir is right; if you looked at the dark side all the time, you'd never try anything."

"You're answered, Paul," Raoul Dumanoir laughed. "Ever since you returned from leave, you've been holding out for the principles of war laid down by the late and lamented Foch. You forget that we are in the Sahara, where the first requisite of a leader is daring. I feel like stretching my legs. Coming, Paul?"

"Yes."

Vernier remained behind. He tactfully avoided intruding himself between the two old friends. They strolled away side by side. Both had changed their laced high

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boots for the Saharan sandals, the *nayels*.

It was pleasant to walk on the crunching sand, through the freshening wind, after the dust and heat of the long day.

They circled the sentries' ring. Then Dumanoir halted, rested a big hand on Raynal's shoulder: "No one knows you as well as I do, Paul. Not even your family. So I know you are perturbed about something, uneasy. Are you deflating?"

To deflate, in army slang, meant to lose one's nerve. An association of ideas: A man's character collapsed as he lost his courage just as a balloon collapsed when the gas was released. Raynal grew angry.

"No, Raoul. But I know you had orders to keep to the north, and not to come this far south under any circumstances. The Camel Corps companies are on the alert here, and there must have been some reason for those orders. If things go wrong, we shall be in hot water."

"I shall be, you mean," Dumanoir corrected. "I'm in command. You have nothing to do with it. Things won't go wrong. You know, that's the trouble out here, as a rule: the officers fear responsibility, blame, while native chieftains have only themselves to answer to. So the native chieftains are bolder. In consequence, they get away with a lot of things and get the reputation of being smarter.

"But there is something else on your mind. I've heard rumors."

"Who from? Where?"

"At the post, at Ksar-Nazrain. An army station out here is like a small village." Dumanoir shrugged. "We've been friends for years. You could talk to me."

"Yes, I could."

Raynal hesitated. He was faced with something he dreaded far more than the risks of the combat: an explanation, possibly a quarrel with Dumanoir.

HE HAD been on leave a short time before, across the mountains, in Meknes. Raynal senior, a high official in the Protectorate of Morocco, had given him some advice. And he had picked an old subject, Raynal's admiration for Dumanoir, which had started during their first year together at St. Cyr.

"Your chief objection, Paul," the old gentleman had said, "is that your friend Raoul would object to a change. I have never denied that he is worthy of admiration. He graduated with high marks and he is a splendid athlete. He is a good friend in that he would certainly die for a friend.

"But would he live for a friend? You do. You intended to enter the flying branch of the service, you have passed examinations for native languages. But you persist in remaining in a spot where your special qualifications do not help you. To be Dumanoir's second. You picked the Legion to remain with him, transferred once to stay with him. You have become his shadow."

"He is a born leader, Father."

"And has the self-esteem of the born leader, and the ruthlessness. You're my son, and I don't particularly relish the idea that you may be killed not only in the line of duty but to get him an additional citation or promotion. You know he is reckless, you know what part luck played in his success. His luck will not always hold out."

"He is the finest man I know."

"Possibly. But you're throwing away your career to promote his. However, it is as you wish."

Raynal had been resentful, then his father's words had taken root. He had taken stock of the past, and had realized that Dumanoir always contrived to make anyone with him, even superior officers, appear to be his seconds.

Just as, now, he was risking eighty lives against orders. This detachment had been sent out to patrol a definite zone, and was now hung in space, communications willfully cut off, some seventy miles too far southward.

"YOU'RE a bit embarrassed, aren't you?" Dumanoir resumed, his voice growing harsh. "You did send in an application for transfer." His hand dropped

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from Raynal's shoulder. "That means leaving the Legion, you know."

"Of course."

"And implies a long stay in France. It will be years before you get back into living again."

"Living?" Raynal repeated.

"Yes, living. This"—Dumanoir's hand moved in the shadows. "This is what we craved, those last months in school: the Legion, the open, action. To chance a patriotic platitude: serving. Serving as a soldier, not as a sort of station master in some quiet garrison town. You're twenty-four—"

"As you are."

"And you'll plunge right into routine work. You're quitting."

"Opinions might differ on that, Raoul," Raynal replied. "It may be that aviation may have its own risks. In any case, I did not seek the change.

"During a conversation with my father, General Hermes, who is on the Residents staff, found out that I had passed the exams for native languages—no trick at all, as I was reared in North Africa—and that I had a pilot's license, civilian.

"Officers with such requirements are needed, for reconnoitering south of the Atlas Range and on the Rio del Oro border. That region has to be explored, mapped, for civilian flying to the Soudan in the future. It's a big job."

"It means quitting the Legion," Dumanoir insisted.

"That's my sole regret. Foolish, perhaps, as I might remain a subaltern for years. Take Delpech, for example: a graduate of St. Cyr, intelligent, twice wounded, nine years in. Still a lieutenant, with nothing to show beyond his colonial cross."

Dumanoir sneered aloud like a small boy.

"*Bahah*—we don't work for promotion, decorations, glory, any more than for money. We serve, we are free, we live, with the chance of some excitement now and then. A man's life."

"I'm not losing that. I shall be on active service in Africa after three months of special training at Istres Flying School."

"What do you think the men will think of you?"

"They'll forget it."

But Raynal was concerned. The Legionnaires would not like his voluntary transfer to another branch. For them the Legion was an end in itself, not a means.

It was home, refuge for them. They could not conceive that any man could wish himself elsewhere, because it had helped them recover a goal in life.

Good men, all of them, warriors. The thick-necked senior-sergeant, a German-Swiss named Leibenroth, with his comic accent; Sergeant Malthos, long and dark, a mysterious fellow, who played the piano very well and was a master at chess—neither of them would approve of the change. And Vernier would be shocked.

"Forget it, will they?" Dumanoir answered. "Never. They've seen it growing as I have—"

"Seen what growing?"

"Your funk, old man, your damnable funk."

"See here, Raoul—"

"You don't like me to call things by their names, do you? Listen, I've been watching you, shaking in your boots. The Sahara scares you, fighting scares you. You've been looking for a way out. I wonder you returned from leave at all, didn't find some way of dodging another patrol down here.

"All your whining about going against orders, when we have the chance of picking up a lot of stuff, perhaps of bagging Milud er Brabi. Mausers, they have Mausers!"

"I forbid you to speak as—"

"You what? Why, you dirty little coward—"

RAYNAL'S fist caught Dumanoir on the chin, and the bigger man fell back a step. "You still have a little guts, Paul. Enough to hit at me. That's surprising.

"Don't worry, there will be no duel. But you'll think things over, and stay with us. You'll feel better after we've

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been under fire again, and you've come through."

Raynal nursed his hand. "My application is in, and stays in, Dumanoir. And let me say this: If you saw a chance of getting ahead by leaving the Legion, even if it meant joining the cops, you'd take it. You filled out an application for the Mobile Guard, sixteen months ago, only you found you hadn't put in the required time."

"Spying on me?"

"By chance. Someone spoke about it in Meknes, when your name was mentioned. Not being in the Legion, the chap did not know it amounted to an accusation."

Dumanoir was silent for a long space.

"Let's go back," he said at last. And they strode back to the center of the camp. Vernier joined them. They sat for a few minutes in silence. Around them rose the snores of the tired, sleeping men. The mules rattled their chains monotonously, endlessly, *tick-tingle-tingle-tick-tick* . . .

"You have the first watch, Vernier, haven't you?" Dumanoir asked suddenly.

"Yes, Lieutenant."

"All right. We'll turn in." His voice was vibrant with restrained anger. Suddenly, his control seemed to break. "Vernier!"

"Lieutenant?"

"You'll have the circling detachment, I'll take the attacking party. Lieutenant Raynal will command the mule guards. I know it is customary to leave a sergeant, in a detachment of our strength. But the lieutenant is weary and we must give him a chance to rest."

"Listen, Dumanoir—" Raynal started.

"You begrudge the risk. Certainly, I shall do nothing to cut off your career too soon, old man."

"I object to—"

Vernier interrupted gravely: "I wish to listen only to the orders that concern me. I believe it is better for officers to keep such matters private."

He added, in a lower voice: "Some of the men must be awake. You two are close friends, you've had a row. Tomorrow, it will be forgotten. I'm your inferior in ranking, but your senior in experience. No good comes of open quarreling. What happened between you out there is bad enough—"

"You know?" Dumanoir murmured.

"Already. You forget that the sentries are alert, and that shadows can be distinguished against the sky. No one will talk—where it will harm either of you. But you want to appear friendly, to avoid spreading gossip."

Vernier rose, buckled on his pistol: "Well, first turn of inspection!"

CHAPTER II

BREATHLESS MESSAGE

THE night was ending and the dunes rolled against the dark sky, white as snow under the waning moon, when the Legion detachment halted at the emplacement where the animals would be parked.

They had covered the distance at a fantastic speed for infantry, because of the system in use in the mounted companies: One man in the saddle of a mule, the other hanging on and trotting alongside.

Twice each hour, at a whistled signal, there was a quick change, the man on the mule alighting, refreshed by a comparative rest, the man afoot replacing him on the animal.

"Officers and noncoms—attention."

A circle was formed around Lieutenant Dumanoir, who gave his last instructions in detail, rapidly, confidently.

"Don't answer the first warning shots," he concluded. "That will give us additional time to approach. If we do not return the sentries' fire, there will be a few seconds of indecision among the aroused men. They will remain prone, thinking there might have been a mistake, a guard with a nervous trigger-finger. Even ten seconds count. Understood?"

"Yes, Lieutenant," several voices replied.

"Lieutenant Raynal—"

"Mon lieutenant?"

"You will take charge of the guard detachment here. Under no circumstances are

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you to move until I send word to come forward. You understand?"

"Perfectly, Lieutenant."

"All right. See you later."

He did not offer to shake hands.

The attacking parties started out, almost as one: forty men behind Dumanoir, thirty with Vernier. They parted some distance away, the sub-lieutenant toward the left, that is progressing south and east to circle the well and head off fugitives from Dumanoir's drive due south.

In five minutes, the long files had slipped beyond the dunes, vanished from sight. And, as if their disappearance had been a signal, the sun bobbed up, the eastern dunes suddenly were crested with fire, long shadows stretched on the soil.

Eleven Legionnaires had remained with Raynal—ten privates and a sergeant. They drove in light stakes, chained the animals in groups of five. The lieutenant examined the location carefully, and did not like it too well.

Of course, the necessity for concealment was great; nevertheless he and his charges were too exposed, on the floor of a shallow valley dominated by crests on all sides.

To the west, the dunes eased upward gently, were perfectly smooth, without cover. But the eastern slope was steeper, strewn with numerous boulders, some very large. That slope was but five or six hundred meters away, and would have answered the purpose of concealment, with the addition of some protection.

But he had orders; and regardless of his attitude toward the orders of his chiefs, Dumanoir expected his orders to be obeyed.

Raynal listened and shrugged. Even his untrained ears could perceive sounds from the Legion parties, the clicking of metal, once or twice muffled voices. What worried him was the complete silence from the well. At this hour, the caravan should have started to pack.

He had a premonition of evil, but fought against it, calling it pre-combat anguish, familiar to men when the nerves grow tense. He found himself hoping that the raiders had left during the night, to avoid a clash.

Then he wondered whether Dumanoir had not been right: Was he losing his nerve? How else did a normally courageous man explain a growing weakness, save as he explained his, by thinking of danger?

His own plight worried him. If Dumanoir was successful, how would his part appear in official reports? Left to command the mule guards, when Vernier, Leibenroth, Malthos or four or five other sergeants could have been left instead?

He grew furious at the realization of how well Dumanoir had arranged things: If the attack was successful, Raynal would have taken no active part in it. If it failed, he, as second in command, must shoulder part of the blame. For not once had he registered a definite protest against disobedience of orders before witnesses.

HE GLANCED at his watch: The first shots should come soon. He walked about restlessly, halted before Tchanak, the young sergeant left with him, a stocky, dark-skinned chap, with a flashing grin.

"What do you think of it, Tchanak?"

Tchanak's grin did not appear. He brought his heels together, stood at attention to reply, in a crisp voice that fringed insolence: "I do not think, Lieutenant."

"Perhaps you're right," Raynal admitted, walking on.

Tchanak, ordinarily eager to chat with an officer, had retrenched himself behind his inferior rank to refuse conversation. This was evidence that Raynal's quarrel with Dumanoir was known, and that the men sided with the commander.

This attitude was plain in the others, too. They came to attention when Raynal passed them, but did not smile or speak.

"Damn them," Raynal muttered.

Yet he understood them perfectly well. For years, his devotion to Dumanoir had been unswerving; he had been with him against the world.

And he noted another strange fact: His admiration for Dumanoir had started to change when he had learned, quite by

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chance, that the big fellow had made a secret application for transfer out of the Legion. And that was the very thing he himself was doing—transferring.

Why was it a sin, almost a crime, to change from the Legion to another outfit? The Legion was simply infantry, superb infantry, but more recent in creation than many regiments in the regular army. Yet the Legion exacted a special, unswerving loyalty.

Very few men, once they had made the grade, been accepted as Legion officers, ever left the corps of their own initiative. It was a matter of common knowledge tnat colonels had delayed their own promotion because attaining the stars of brigadier general meant leaving the Legion.

It was illogical, crazy—but armies die without such illogical, crazy prides and traditions.

THE sun was perceptibly higher, the heat was starting. By now, the detachments must be very near the well. And still there had been no warning shots, no outcries. Perhaps the raiders had left.

The men had been following their comrades in imagination, as he had; for unconsciously they had stopped talking, faced south, straining their eyes against the blanketing dunes, ears alert for the first sounds. Being Legionnaires, they cursed their own inconspicuous share in the coming action.

Tchanak was rolling a cigarette, in pretended unconcern. But his fingers kept fumbling, and the tobacco crumbled through the burst paper without his thinking of lighting up.

Suddenly, one of the mules lifted its head, about to bray, and a guard leaped and caught it by the nostrils. A second later, all heard the call it had been about to answer, a distant, but unmistakable bray.

"They're there, they're there—"

Raynal checked an impulse to verify the loading of his pistol. A number of his men were not under such control, for they lifted their guns, slid open the bolt, for the comforting sight of the brass breech in the oiled steel.

Brusquely, there was a ripping, crackling explosion, a solid volley, and not fired by the Legionnaires' Lebels. It is impossible to define in words the difference between the detonations of various fire-arms, but the trained ear is not deceived.

These shots resounded oddly, less "coppery," more "greasily" than the Government weapons. And that first volley was followed by a rapid, swelling fusillade. Raynal estimated the number of rifles in action at thirty or even more.

Almost at once another discharge crashed out, some distance further, and kept up, as brisk, as strong. Undoubtedly, the flanking force under Vernier had met resistance also.

One fact leaped to mind at once: these solid volleys without preliminary warning shots or challenge, showed that the enemy had not been surprised, but had been waiting, alert.

And from this fact sprang another fact: The natives must believe that they had a strong chance to win, because Saharans never accept a combat that can be avoided —unless they believe the issue of it will be of profit to them.

Tchanak had reached the same conclusions, evidently, for he forgot his hostile attitude. "Sounds bad, Lieutenant. Like an ambush." He lifted his chin to indicate the western slope. "Maybe we better get under cover. They'll sure try to swipe the animals."

Raynal laughed, with a confidence he did not feel.

"Our chaps will clean them up pretty quick. Listen, there goes an automatic—"

The trepidation of the gun crashed through the fusillade. The men knew the peculiarities of all automatic weapons with the detachment, and instantly identified this one: "Number Two—that's Bazan shooting. Two francs that junk jams up on him in three minutes."

The Lebels wielded by Legionnaires were in action now, individual firing. Other automatics picked up the metallic song

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The din assumed the proportions of a pitched combat.

Raynal felt lured by the firing; the groups under Vernier were his own groups, and he felt that he should be at their head. To hang about, idle, waiting, was irritating.

"We might move up a bit closer," Tcharnak suggested. "How about it, Lieutenant?"

"Orders are to stick it here," Raynal told him. "Do you think I like it?"

Tcharnak's even white teeth showed in a grin. Then, although his mouth did not close, his expression changed, a bewildered look grew in his eyes. He lurched forward, and Raynal instinctively caught him.

Then he heard the shot, released the body which fell heavily, looked up toward the sound.

THE crest to the west was flickering pale flame, the air was vibrating. Probably a dozen men were in sight, moving down the side of the dune in long leaps.

Raynal bent, tore the carbine from the dead sergeant's grip, straightened and opened fire. Though a sense of panic shook his frame, his reflexes were accurate. Eye and hands were steady. He did not miss one of the three shots in the clip.

Several others had recovered from their surprise and were firing. In fifteen seconds the attackers melted, some remaining in plain sight, motionless, but seven or eight running back to cover.

Raynal thought rapidly. It would be foolish to remain here, in the open, under plunging fire. These natives might be but a vanguard for a stronger party. Orders or not, ten dead men would be of no help to the detachment.

"Starting with one, alternate men lead the animals toward the boulders," he called. "Others keep with me."

He hesitated, looking down at Tcharnak, who was grinning forever. He lifted him in his arms, draped him over a passing mule. So far as possible, the Legion does not abandon its dead to mutilation.

As the animals were trotted back, Raynal and five men, widely spaced, faced the crest and sniped at the enemies. They had the advantage so far, as the range was somewhat too long for the Berbers to do their best shooting.

"Cartridges!" Raynal called. A man tossed him a few clips. "Two men stay with me; others run back two hundred yards, open fire."

He and the two privates walked slowly backward, their eyes on the crest. There were more men up there than before, judging by the flashes and the increasing spurting of sand around their feet.

"Take it easy, they're not following fast."

Detonations behind him: the three men had covered the two hundred yards, had turned and resumed firing. Raynal and his men turned and sprinted past them. And supported them in turn as they retreated.

The situation was not as yet dangerous. The natives showed no strong desire to follow swiftly. Probably they were waiting for a chieftain to come and give them instructions. Or their actions depended on reports from the other fields.

The firing continued in the distance, near the well. Raynal wondered how many men the natives had. Certainly more than the seventy-odd they had been following.

And, although Dumanoir had laughed at him, those opposite were using rapid fire guns, some Mausers, with a scattering of Winchesters. In any case, weapons too precise to be faced in the open.

Dead guards and dead animals would be of no use, he kept repeating.

Raynal sought to keep his mind on the present problem. Nevertheless, he worried about the situation as a whole. It was bad, any way one figured it. The surprise attack had failed, the enemy was showing up much stronger than expected, and there was no chance of receiving help.

The detachment was now too far south to be seen by the regular aviation patrols, and Dumanoir had taken care not to report his plans, for fear of a counter-order. Dumanoir had gambled everything.

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And fate had called him.

There was enough water for thirty-six hours, water for sound men. But there would be wounded, for some of those shots were finding marks. And the nearest well to the north was forty-five miles away. Water, water, water . . .

He walked back as in a dream, paused to fire.

AS THE range increased, the natives became more daring, leaked down the western dune in small knots. They showed the amazing agility of true Saharans. Wiry, tireless men, brave, crafty, without temptation to vain display of courage. Raiding was their profession; they were practical fellows working at an old business.

The lieutenant looked over his shoulder. The animals were screened behind the bigger boulders. Not as completely as one might wish, but much better than in the open. The Legionnaires had hitched them securely, and were firing comfortably, propping their rifles on small parapets scooped up from the sand.

Raynal joined them within a few minutes, and rested in the shadow of a big rock.

Widely scattered, cautious, but persistent, the Berbers were creeping across the open ground.

The dead sergeant had been laid on the ground, a handkerchief over his face. After taking breath, Raynal passed from man to man, exchanging a few words, correcting the rear sights in some cases.

Unconsciously, his voice had the tone he used at drill; and this was comforting to him and to the men.

"How do you think it's going over there, Lieutenant?" one of the Legionnaires asked. "Sound like there are a lot of them around here."

"Everything will be all right. The lieutenant knows his job."

"That's true, Lieutenant."

Raynal crouched, and counted the enemy with care. He estimated his foes at between thirty and forty, not quite enough for a rush on ten soldiers firing from cover. There would be no rush for a while.

He scribbled a message on a page of his note-book. He glanced at his watch, wrote down the time:

Attacked by fairly numerous band. Have retreated behind boulders, east slope. One killed, no wounded. Raynal, Lt. 7.22.

Then he called: "Mesnil!"

A rangy young soldier approached.

"Duck over the ridge and get this to Lieutenant Dumanoir. Think you can find him?"

"Sure, Lieutenant. If I don't, nobody'll bawl me out."

He took the slip and started up the slope. The Berbers tried a few long shots at him, but he got away safely.

His messenger gone, Raynal listened to the shooting. What was happening? Who was winning? There was no answer in the blazing sun, in the hot sand. The exchange of shots with the enemy continued.

Then a shout attracted his attention; several men pointed out a running figure. The man was bounding down the incline in enormous strides. Soon he slid flat beside the officer. But he was so winded that he could not talk at first; merely opened and closed his mouth.

Raynal asked him for his paper, and he shook his head.

"Take it easy, easy," Raynal advised. The chap was from Vernier's party.

"No—time to—write. Walked—into it. Six killed—right off. First volley—we—we were—flanked—ambushed! The sub-lieutenant—said—you stay—here and he—comes back here—can't—can't go—go ahead. Too many. Lieutenant Du—Dumanoir—also stopped—could see—he's hit—pretty badly—guys carrying him along—coming this way."

"How many are they?" Raynal asked.

"Don't—know. Seems like thousands." The runner was recovering his breath. "Oh, they cut us up pretty, all right! Lying in wait—never saw anything until they shot. Lots of big fellows in the bunch I saw. Sub-lieutenant, who's been around,

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says they're Rekabats. We must have dropped fifteen their first rush, but a lot are left . . ."

CHAPTER III

WE MARCH WITH DEATH

THE following hours formed a frantic, fantastic series of disconnected scenes. For long afterward, Raynal could not be sure whether he recalled the episodes in their proper sequence, so confused had he become.

Soon after the runner arrived with news that Dumanoir was wounded and Vernier beating a retreat, the natives opposite his position made a determined attack. Their numbers had swelled from two scores to sixty or more; and they raced across the valley, lean-limbed, naked men, howling.

Checked once, then again, they were about to try a third time when a number of Legionnaires spilled into the depression; Dumanoir's groups falling back before other foes.

Within five minutes, the men under Vernier came in sight, in another place, pushed back by another band of warriors. For better than two hours, the three separated segments of the Legion detachment fought to unite, to form a whole.

There were a hundred small scenes, acts of heroism forever forgotten. As always, the Legionnaires sought to carry off their dead. When it became plain that it was impossible, the bodies had to be stripped of arms and ammunition.

Legionnaires had to fight, retreat and carry wounded men along.

At one time the desperate situation nevertheless approached comedy, when European soldiers and native raiders were so mixed that all firing would cease for seconds.

For instance, Dumanoir's groups were caught between enemies on the western dune and others in the valley, the natives in the valley in turn were caught between the lieutenant commanding's riflemen and the guns of the Legionnaires of the mule guard, under Raynal.

The sun beat down in true Saharan fashion; the sand was hot as a stove lid. To make matters worse, a strong searing wind started, that whipped sand particles about like spume lashed from combers.

This ultimately worked out to the advantage of the Legionnaires, disciplined soldiers, provided with a code of whistle signals. The native chieftains had no method of conveying to widely scattered groups the orders needed.

Raynal and his men served as a rallying center for the others, naturally, being provided with a position somewhat easier to hold. As soon as a bunch of Legionnaires reached the line of boulders, it would drop its load of wounded and salvaged weapons and cartridges, and join the organized defense.

"This way—this way—"

The pharmacist corporal, who had been with Vernier's men, found his stuff on a pack mule, and started to work, working under horrible sanitary conditions, without sterilized water, in the blowing sand dust, using iodine profusely.

Raynal, who occasionally assisted him, grew sick, for he knew that many of the wounds would be tetanic in short order. There was a supply of serum somewhere in the medical stores, but—where?

The hastily unpacked supplies scattered, as men knocked things aside in their rushes to and from endangered spots. The primordial necessity was the immediate defense.

Vernier was led in by another wounded man. He appeared to have been blinded; his whole face was a mass of caking blood and sand, leaking in thick gouts at the chin. He had caught a slug in the head, high, and the flesh was so torn, so sensitive, that it was impossible under such conditions to ascertain the extent of the damage.

He recognized Raynal's voice, choked off his cursing and laughed.

"The joke's on me, Raynal: This was meant for you."

Then he added: "Leave me alone—can't do a thing for me now. And I suppose you're the only officer able to walk."

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THE automatic rifles had jammed because of the sand. The riflemen, as soon as they reached comparative safety, started to clean them. Reserve magazines were taken from the ammunition mules.

And Raynal ordered grenades distributed. The explosions added an acrid odor to the smells inevitable on a battlefield, the stench of human sweat and drying blood.

The mules—good, sensible animals—did not try to break away: they knew where the water was. But they expressed their distaste for what was going on by kicking out at random.

Raynal ran from one spot to another, tried to bolster up the line by careful placing of the automatics as soon as they were reported in condition to work.

Through his own perturbation, he found time to admire the men he commanded. There was no panic, no despair. Of course, there was nowhere to run, no direction a man could take to feel safe.

But what astonished him afresh was the casual good nature of all of them. Not once but ten times, he heard comments on how superbly the natives had trapped them.

"Eh, they got us leaning over, didn't they?"

"Nothing the matter with those guys, what?"

"They ought to hire whoever fixed this up for us to teach at Polytechnic School."

"What's that stink?"

"Stink? I had a pint of pernod in my hip pocket and it's busted. It's a grand feeling; try it sometime."

A man gestured, pointed: "There's the lieutenant. Must have tripped over something!"

Two Legionnaires were dragging Dumanoir between them; several others formed a screen behind the group, firing and swinging rifle butts to keep away dogged pursuers. An officer's head is a fine collector's piece in the Sahara.

Raynal ran to meet his old friend. Dumanoir, bareheaded and blood-stained, moaned as his hand was grasped. Like Vernier, he had a head wound. In addition, blood showed through the cloth of his uniform on the flank and on the right leg.

He mumbled something unintelligible, and it was clear that he was but half-conscious.

Behind him came the rest of the stragglers.

Raynal waited a few seconds, scanning the swarm of Berbers, to spot a khaki uniform, or a white tunic, then he gave the signal for the automatics to resume fire at will.

Automatically, he looked at his watch, to check the time. And the words shaped themselves in his head as he would write them down in his report!

Eight-fifty-five: All survivors appear to be in.

SENIOR-SERGEANT Leibenroth, slightly wounded in the shoulder, nevertheless had thought to take a small group up to the crest, to guard against a circling movement and an attack from that quarter.

Raynal saw Vernier, seated with his back against a stone, his hands loose on his lap. His head was bandaged so that it resembled an enormous ball of stained white linen.

"How do you feel?" Raynal asked him.

"Like a damn fool," came the muffled reply. "Everything was too quiet; I should have suspected something."

Sergeant Malthos and the pharmacist were tending to Lieutenant Dumanoir. That officer with the resounding, theatrical name, was a pathetic sight. One of the men was washing his head wound, a hole near the cheekbone, with a swab of cotton dipped in a basin in which permanganate tablets had been dissolved in less than a pint of water. The leg of his breeches had been cut open, his thigh wound bandaged.

Raynal knelt at his side.

"You'll be all right, Raoul. None of them are bad."

"Must get out—must get us out," Dumanoir mumbled.

"Sure thing. But we must get things organized. Listen, can we possibly get to the well? How many are there—"

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But Dumanoir closed his eyes wearily, seemed to faint. It was Sergeant Malthos who answered: "About two hundred and fifty, I should say, Lieutenant. They seem to belong to two, perhaps three different gangs.

"The guys we followed down here are Drawi, as we expected, probably led by Milud er Brabi. But they've been joined by others, Rekabats. Can't mistake their blue clothing. Pretty well fitted out for guns, too. Only a few Gras rifles in the whole lot—all the rest magazine weapons."

"Think we'd have a chance to make the well?"

"No, Lieutenant. They won't quit easy, as they have a lot of animals there, a lot of loot. They'll fight hard for that."

"That means—" Raynal started.

"Retreating, Lieutenant. I don't think they'll hang on too long, though. We knocked off plenty of them, when we got going."

Malthos was right to some extent. The natives had dispersed, run back to the western dunes for cover. The shots exchanged at twelve to fourteen hundred meters were not very dangerous.

Raynal had the roll called, and was appalled by the result. Twenty-two Legionnaires—sergeant, corporals and privates—were missing; and Tcharnak made twenty-three fatalities. There were nine men hit so badly that they could not walk, eight more with such wounds as partially incapacitated them, two officers out of three completely out of action.

Fifty percent casualties in a couple of hours. And that did not count those lightly wounded, men weakened by surface slashes, tears and bruises.

"How's the water?" he asked the corporal in charge.

"Going fast, Lieutenant."

Raynal gave the usual instructions, among them that cloth should be dipped in water and given the wounded to suck. Men who have lost blood become very thirsty anywhere; and in the Saharan heat, thirst soon becomes a torture.

There was one cheerful item of news: only four of the animals had been killed or injured enough to be disposed of as useless.

THE combat was at a standstill; very few shots were being fired. There was hope that the enemy did not know that the detachment had run short of water.

Nevertheless, some of them would cling, to glean loot. A Lebel rifle or carbine was worth at least four thousand francs in the desert market, cartridges five or six francs each, mules from five thousand upward.

Everything was valuable to the semi-primitive warriors; leather work, tin pots, cooking dixies, steel hitching chains, canned goods, flour. A crippled detachment of European troops was an ambulating gold mine to the raiders.

Raynal took advantage of the lull to visit Dumanoir, found him stretched in the shady lee of a boulder. He moaned, and only spoke in mumbling words. Sergeant Malthos led Raynal aside.

"He doesn't know much of what's going on, Lieutenant. That crack in the face was pretty bad. Knocked out some of his teeth. The one in the side is nothing much—flesh wound along the ribs. But his leg has a hole you can shove your fist into—hammered slug, probably from a Gras rifle."

That meant that Raynal was in full charge. He was left with a handsome task on his hands, salvaging the detachment, getting it back to the station.

Vernier, squatting not far away, had managed to push the stem of his pipe through the bandages wound about his head, and he was smoking.

That man appeared to be made of forged steel, body and soul. For all he or anyone else knew, his sight was gone. Moreover, his suffering must have been intense. But the bowl jutting from the ball of bloody cloth glowed, smoke drifted out casually.

"What to do? What to do?" He gestured with his pipe. "Hard to tell. We can't travel in the midday heat, the way we're fixed. We can start late in the after-

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noon, knock off maybe twelve, fifteen miles before darkness, then rest until the moon comes out. We should make the well by dawn, if we shake a leg.

"I should say we don't have to worry about their attacking seriously. They'll hang on, sure, but they'll wait for us to drop."

He stopped and puffed smoke.

"We don't even know how many they are," Raynal said.

"We can find out. Some of them followed us pretty close to here, and some of the wounded must be hiding near. Find one, and if he is too discreet, have Leibenroth take him for a walk to the crest. That guy can make natives talkative."

RAYNAL would always remember the journey to the well, started late in the afternoon, as a period of sheer horror.

The water had dwindled with amazing speed, sparingly though it was used. The wounded, patched in gritty, dry bandages, were shaken up by the hard trot of the hurrying mules. They moaned, a few screamed when pain broke down their pride.

The sound men had hardly touched fluid since early morning. Before long, the tongue grew hard, felt horny inside the mouth, rasped against the palate, while the skin of the lips crackled and stung.

Vernier was an example for all. Rather than endure the jolting in his saddle, which set his head to throbbing, he hung on to the pack of a mule and stumbled along on foot. The man leading the animal would call out obstacles.

The raiders followed, but very wide of the detachment, in widely scattered groups, to avoid the fire of the automatics, now in working order. They fired at very long range, the Legionnaires returned the shots, the detachment progressed in a constant rattle of gunfire.

Very few of the bullets, however, caused damage, and only two animals were struck.

Raynal had given up his mount to one of the wounded. He walked beside a lanky fellow in a blue *gandoura,* who, with his thick, matted hair, as large and as compact as a Cossack's astrakan bonnet, with his long beard and Semitic features, resembled a prophet of Biblical days more than the ruthless ruffian he really was.

Moha u Besher had been found hiding in a depression of sand, not a hundred yards from the Legion's line. He had a bullet hole through the right shoulder, his left forearm had been broken by a butt blow. But he chatted and laughed, showed the endurance and the resistance to physical pain proverbial in Saharan tribesmen. Although he hotly denied the status of Saharan: he was a Trekni, a Moor from the Sahel.

As soon as he had realized that he was not to be finished off, he had elected Lieutenant Raynal as a pal. He was not merely willing to talk, but eager.

No, he did not belong to Milud er Brabi's band, but to another, almost twice as strong, led by a Mauritanian chieftain, Moktar. They had intended to raid into the central desert of Touati, but they had been driven back by the Camel Corps squadron from Adrar.

They had joined forces with Milud, although they did not like him, because there was an opportunity for the combined bands to wipe out the entire Legion detachment.

Oh, indeed yes, Milud had know the detachment was on his tracks. He had known, even that its commander was disobeying orders, as the French wished to keep that zone clear in an effort to trap him, Milud, between the Adrar camel soldiers coming from the south and the Tabelbala Camel Company, coming due east.

Yes, Milud was very well informed.

"He knows thy name, *sidi lieutenant,* the names of the wounded chiefs. He always learns all he can about French officers who come to the desert: because, you understand, some officers are much smarter than others."

Moha said this with apparent innocence, but Raynal thought there was a gleam of humor in his eyes as he spoke. Neither

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Dumanoir nor himself could rank very high in natives' estimation. They had been lured south, trapped, tricked like small children.

Moha said he was resigned to his fate, and suggested that his new friend, the lieutenant, should try to get him accepted in the *Meharistes*.

Raynal agreed to do what he could: Moha would make a fine Camel Corps soldier. And his presence there would not be unusual, for nine out of ten *Meharistes* had been raiders.

At the night halt, he gorged on canned beef, then stretched out to sleep. But when the moon appeared and the order to march on was given, he was nowhere to be found in the camp.

Moha had contrived to escape undetected, with his wounded shoulder, his broken arm, and the steel chain which Raynal, who was not too much of a fool, had ordered locked about his ankles.

Vernier laughed when he was told and quoted: "Keep water in a sieve and a Saharan in chains."

THE long night march was a fearful ordeal for all. There was no water remaining, not a drop. The animals had to be driven hard; delirious men howled their pain. Flickers of flame stabbed the night on remote crests, bullets whined overhead, or thudded into the sand.

Raynal had moments when he was not aware of what was he was doing, when he tried to tighten his belt to ease the ache of thirst.

The noncoms, themselves staggering and near the end of their endurance, punched privates to keep them going, kicked fallen men erect again. They received blows in exchange; altercations broke out everywhere over the slightest pretext. Those dying men threatened murder with every breath.

Raynal felt his authority slipping fast. Thirst was cracking discipline.

At dawn, by a miracle of energy, the detachment reached the well. The map was consulted; all landmarks were there, the twin dunes, the peculiarly shaped boulders. But the hole itself was completely invisible.

There was a period of panic, a search. Then the plank shoring was located under a drift of sand. The well was partly filled, probably by a storm.

There was no thought of trying to reach another well. Raynal detailed the men to dig, using trenching tools, hauling sand out in canvas buckets.

Day broke, the broiling heat started, the flies grew active once more. And the enemy had to be held at bay.

It was mid-morning before the buckets were hoisted filled with damp sand. Men had to be restrained from putting the stuff in their mouths. At last, a sort of thin mud came up, and the men working below, stark naked, called up that water was showing. That mud was placed in cloth, filtered into tin cups. It stank.

Three of the wounded men had died by noon, when the buckets came up at last filled with clear, cool water. For an hour, every drop was used for drinking.

Then, with fluid swishing in their bellies, the wounded received new dressings. But the intense heat had caused many infections, there would be a number of amputations as soon as a surgeon could be reached.

The pursuers had settled at a distance, standing by. Despite the water supply, they knew the Legionnaires were growing weaker. They were not numerous now, fifty or less, as the majority had remained south with the loot. But their sniping proved annoying.

"We stick here," Raynal told Vernier. "Our absence is known, a plane will locate us within a short time. Can't take a chance to march on."

He indicated the miserable encampment, forgetting that the other could not see: "I can't ask those chaps to march a hundred and fifty kilometers in that condition. Dumanoir's lost consciousness."

Vernier released a stream of smoke thoughtfully.

"He's always lucky," he concluded.

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CHAPTER IV

THE SERVICE REMEMBERS

BITTER as were the hours spent at the well until the aviation reported them, Raynal almost regretted them a few days later. For he found himself under arrest, in his own quarters at Ksar-Nazrain. A Legionnaire wearing side-arms was at his door, and he could not leave for any purpose without an escort.

Forty-eight hours after his return to the post, Captain Fourgues, commanding the Legion depot companies, summoned him to the office. The captain was a thick-necked, matter-of-fact officer with a blunt manner.

"Read this," he said.

It was an order from Midelt that Lieutenant Raynal should be placed under strict supervision, that his mail should be censored, everything connected with the unlucky expedition struck out.

"What does this mean? What are the charges?" Raynal asked.

"None that I know of." Fourgues shrugged. "I suppose I was presumed to do this quietly, without warning you."

He grinned: "But I shall misunderstand them: you're under arrest. Now don't get worried; I'll explain in a few words.

"There's always some hysteria in certain places when a catastrophe occurs down here. There are reporters on the way, and some people are interested in keeping you from speaking with them. They're afraid you'll talk too much to some guy connected with a political sheet, who will use the stuff to attack the administration in Morocco.

"They want to make up their own version of what happened, to save face. After all, it's pretty hard to explain away thirty-odd killed."

"Still, Captain, I don't see why—"

"You don't see how you were to blame. Neither do I. You were under Dumanoir's orders, had to obey without protest. Regulations are that your sole motive for disobeying would have been a belief, supported by other subordinates, that Dumanoir was mad.

"There's no disgrace, just a foolish formality. Look here, don't feel like a criminal: I shake hands with you."

Raynal laughed and grasped the hand offered.

"Thank you, Captain."

"If they try to get too rough with you, I'll step in. Don't worry about anything. Not a thing, *hein?*"

The wounded had been taken north in ambulance planes. News of them came very soon. Vernier would recover his sight. The missile had chipped the frontal bone, come through the flesh near the nose. The eyes had swollen shut from the tremendous shock.

Dumanoir was in the main hospital at Casablanca. He also was expected to be returned to duty in a few months.

Raynal, scanning the newspapers—he was allowed to receive uncensored papers—saw nothing to indicate that either Dumanoir or Vernier was under watch. Then he received a letter from his father, who had many friends in military circles.

"So far as I can find out, there are no charges against you. A judicial commission has been formed, and is going around asking questions."

THE "rogatory committee," or judicial commission, reached Ksar-Nazrain after nine days. It was composed of five officers, not one of them a Legionnaire.

Raynal was called into the cavalry mess-room, temporarily transformed into a tribunal. Captain Fourgues, despite his protests, was kept out of the debates. And out of the room.

The colonel-presiding, an *officier d'administration de l'Armée,* was young for a man of his rank in French service, with a round, sleek, very intelligent face. Obviously, he was more of a politician than a soldier, and Raynal immediately nicknamed him, mentally, a "dwarf Richelieu": for he had the soft manner and dignity of a prelate.

"Sit down, Lieutenant Raynal. You are

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not on trial!" The colonel rested a carefully-manicured, plump hand on a sheaf of paper.

"Have you anything to add to your report? No? You write very well, and the fine things you have to say about the courage and skill of the aviators who located you will be acted upon.

"Now, myself and my colleagues all realize that it is useless to question Legionnaires officially, for they will refuse to speak on certain subjects, through *esprit de corps*.

"Nevertheless, a number of them, including wounded, have talked unofficially, and we have heard rumors that must be cleared up before full judgment can be passed on the sad affair we are investigating. I naturally must inform you that if necessary we could trace those rumors to their sources and compel an answer. But we do not wish to have to do that. Are they true?"

Raynal smiled. "If *mon colonel* would be so kind as to inform me of the nature of the rumors, perhaps I would be better able to give the required answers."

"Of course, of course. There was a quarrel between Lieutenant Dumanoir and yourself on the evening preceding the unfortunate venture of the mounted detachment."

"Yes, Colonel."

"What was its motive, may we ask?"

"A private matter, Colonel."

"A matter not connected with the service?"

"Not directly, Colonel."

"Ah? We may return to this later. Lieutenant Raynal, did you strike Lieutenant Dumanoir during the argument?"

Raynal hesitated.

"Yes, Colonel."

"What did Lieutenant Dumanoir do about it?"

"Nothing. I am sure that he realized at once that he had given me reason to lose my temper. His words had called for such a reply."

"You struck him. In the face. He accepted the blow?"

"Colonel, you will understand better when you learn that Lieutenant Dumanoir and I were schoolmates at St. Cyr, that we knew each other even before. That, before we had attained manhood and the status of officers, we had had quarrels, as normal between boys and young men. We had exchanged blows before.

"I am sure that Dumanoir employed the language he did only because of that close association of years, and I struck out for the same reason."

"Did you quarrel because you wished to abandon the unauthorized expedition against the raiders?"

"No, Colonel."

"A protest might count in your favor, remember."

"The answer is no, Colonel."

"I am certain no one here questions your sincerity."

"Thank you, Colonel."

"Don't mention it, Lieutenant."

THE colonel's voice became slightly less bland. "Now, Lieutenant Raynal, in your opinion, did the quarrel and the blow occasion a change in plans for the attack? I mean did Lieutenant Dumanoir alter his dispositions in any way because of them?"

"My answer would be speculation, Colonel."

"A certain amount of speculation is good, Lieutenant." The smooth face beamed. "Speculate."

"In my opinion, they did. I mean influence orders. I was to be in command of the circling detachment. Instead, I was assigned to the mule guards. Certainly the lieutenant changed his mind about giving me command of the circling detachment during the night; and quite possibly our argument influenced him. He alone knows the truth of that."

"You resented the change, the inconspicuous part given you, didn't you? Oh, quite normal that you should. It was humiliating. Now, Lieutenant Raynal, we come to ground that will be harder to cover."

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The colonel half-smiled as he glanced at his companions: Lieutenant Raynal had answered readily so far, on matters that could not be concealed.

He turned to the young officer again. "You changed your position the morning of the attack, although you had strict orders not to."

"I did, Colonel."

"Did your natural resentment prompt you in any degree?"

"No, Colonel—" Raynal started forward.

"Please, please. We are all trying for the truth. Why did you abandon the emplacement originally assigned you with the animals?"

"My report goes into that at considerable length, Colonel. Briefly: We were in the open, exposed to plunging fire from dominating crests, assailed by an undetermined number of enemies. As proved by later events, keeping the animals safe and sound was most important. Even had we escaped massacre, we would have suffered very heavily.

"I believed it was a case, Colonel, in which a mild show of intelligence, let alone initiative, would not be out of place."

The colonel nodded, consulted notes.

"Did you report your shift in positions?"

"As soon as possible, Colonel. I wrote a note and sent it to Lieutenant Dumanoir."

"Whom did you send?"

"Second-class Legionnaire Mesnil, Alfred."

"Where is he at present?"

"Died of his wounds, Colonel."

"Have you that note, with an acknowledgement?"

"No, Colonel."

"Do you believe Lieutenant Dumanoir received it?"

"I do, Colonel."

"Explain."

"Legionnaire Mesnil returned with Lieutenant Dumanoir's groups. He was wounded in the lung. While I did not question him, it was probable that having reached his destination he had fulfilled his mission. I told him I would cite him."

"He did not protest the citation?"

"He was dying, Colonel. Dying and thirsty. Legionnaire Mesnil needed all his strength to keep from crying for water. There was none to give him."

THE colonel eyed Raynal dryly. "We are familiar with the details of your sufferings. And no one here doubts the heroism of Legionnaires. It is your belief that if Mesnil had not delivered the message, he would have told you so?"

"How do I know, Colonel?" Raynal grew red, then white.

"You would have to speculate again. But your opinion is that Lieutenant Dumanoir knew that you had made a change?"

"Naturally I believe that, Colonel. It stands to reason that Legionnaire Mesnil, even had he lost the paper or failed to deliver it, would have told someone that we had moved to cover."

"So that Lieutenant Dumanoir had no reason to think that he could retreat to the exact spot where he had left you, and therefore allow the use of ammunition, figuring that it could be replaced some five hundred meters sooner than proved the case?"

"I don't know surely, Colonel."

"In your opinion, was Lieutenant Dumanoir's detachment short of ammunition when it reached the small valley at the spot where you had been left?"

"How do I know, Colonel? The groups were not firing as before, but I did not then think it was from lack of ammunition. The automatics had jammed. And the mixup was so confused down there that the men might have been afraid to fire for fear of striking members of Lieutenant Vernier's groups, which had appeared not far distant. I heard nothing about ammunition being lacking at any time."

The colonel made several notes, looked at the reports on the table before him.

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He nodded. "There is no mention of a shortage by anyone, in fact. Now, Lieutenant Raynal—"

"Yes, Colonel?"

"Who knew that the detachment was surpassing its orders by striking southward so far?"

"I can answer only for myself, Colonel."

"You knew?"

"I knew."

"Did you protest to Lieutenant Dumanoir?"

"I mentioned it. I can't say I made an issue of it."

"In your opinion, did Sub-lieutenant Vernier, Sergeant Leibenroth, other noncoms, know that you were exceeding your orders?"

Raynal hesitated. Of course, they had known. They were intelligent, experienced soldiers, had been told the probable route of the detachment in advance. He had overheard some talk about the shift in directions. He avoided the direct answer.

"They did not speak to me, or to Lieutenant Dumanoir within my hearing, about it. They may have realized it, but as there was nothing they could do about it, they did not broach the subject."

"All right, Lieutenant." The colonel smiled. "Now, forgive me for insisting. But you can give me your word of honor that the quarrel that led to the blow was not concerned with military matters—with the army, the Legion?"

Raynal's forehead grew a bit moist.

"I cannot give my word, Colonel."

"No?" The investigator consulted a typewritten paper taken from a green folder. "Did you say something to the effect that the risks involved in serving with the Foreign Legion were a bit too great for the rewards?"

Raynal made a quick gesture.

"I may have, Colonel; but I meant—"

"Oh, we understand, we understand—" the colonel smiled on the angry young man patiently: "Tedium, boredom, a bit of mental depression, what your men term *cafard,* I believe; your conduct the next day shows what you are worth. But Lieutenant Dumanoir then accused you of cowardice."

"Possibly."

"Which explains the blow, of course. And also explains why the lieutenant in charge decided to give you a less conspicuous place. If he believed you were doubtful of success—you see?"

"Quite, Colonel."

"Now, we shall speak to you as we spoke to Lieutenant Dumanoir: We cannot ask you to be friendly, but we wish the matter to end where it is. The information will go no further than this court of inquiry.

"We have taken into account the situation, the nervousness, the fatigue you both were under, and your long acquaintance. There is no question of honor as officers involved. Lieutenant Dumanoir has given us his word that he will drop all thought of a reparation by arms if you will."

"A duel?" Raynal laughed nervously. "Never thought of it."

"And yet"—the colonel shrugged—"other times, other customs. We understand that you have applied for transfer to the aviation. I can assure you that transfer shall be granted.

"We ask you, Lieutenant, to adhere to the official version of the affair which will be published soon, and, both here and in France, to avoid too free conversation about it. There are those who do not comprehend that young officers are hot-blooded, perhaps ambitious, and that punishing them severely for daring initiative would be discouraging to others.

"There will be no court-martial, no further judicial proceedings. Lieutenant Dumanoir will be maintained in his present rank, with an official blame."

Raynal leaned forward.

"And I, Colonel?"

"You atoned for whatever disobedience you showed by the manner in which you extricated a badly mangled detachment." The colonel extended his hand. Then the others.

"Do as well in the aviation, and all will be well."

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CHAPTER V

COCKROACH!

SIX months later, Raynal reached Meknes with a party of friends, civilian pilots from a commercial line. It was after midnight when their powerful car came to a heart-shaking stop before *Chez Alice,* an establishment in the native quarter.

The driver, Bercolet, an internationally famous airman, had seemed determined to move in three dimensions even on the ground; his turns had been more flying than driving.

The party had started much earlier in the day, at an official luncheon to which Raynal had been invited.

Alice, the owner, greeted them with joy, mobilized her entire staff of hostesses. She was a colossal female, tall, broad and thick—with, as Bercolet proclaimed, "more peaks than the whole Atlas range."

She was fond of the flyers; but she remembered Raynal from his sojourn in the city, during his early days with the Foreign Legion, and clasped him to her bosom. It was very much like being stifled in a perfumed rubber mattress.

"Paul, my little rabbit!" she greeted him. "I like to see my boys come back. I treat you to champagne, and from my own stock. No sucker juice for you!"

Raynal enjoyed a moment of triumph. He was showing his civilian friends that the military also hit the high spots on occasions.

"So you're in the aviation now, eh?" Between puffs at the Havana cigar she smoked, Alice spoke of old times. "How do you like it? Read something about you in the papers, didn't I?"

Raynal nodded. He, with a number of other army pilots, had participated in the search for a civilian machine which had crashed in the Sahara. It had been his good luck to spot the wreck and contribute to the rescue of the survivors.

"By the way, your pal, the handsome guy—what's his name? Like something out of a Paul Bourget novel—Dumas? Dunois? No, Dumanoir—well, you just missed him. Went back to the hills day before yesterday. Say, what's the matter with him?"

"Haven't seen him in some time," Raynal said evasively.

"Hardly talks, regular wet blanket. If you ask me, he's deflated, completely deflated. I can tell, because I know men. Oh, it's not that crack on the mug. They've stitched that up so you can hardly notice it. It's just that he ain't so sure now that everything always comes out just right."

"He's had troubles," Raynal said. "Badly wounded—"

"Just told you it wasn't that," Alice insisted. "It's something cracked up all right, but inside of him, not outside. He's like an old guy. Mopes. I heard you two had a row. But you should write him, Paul."

"Write him?"

Raynal started to brood, despite the flow of champagne and the weird mixtures the aviators concocted with it, using brandy, Pernod, anything and everything. The civilian pilots, who led very dangerous lives themselves, understood his mood and respected it. They pretended not to notice.

As the corks popped, as a half-nude Hungarian girl performed an African dance far better than any native, as the hues of the spotlights shifted, Raynal relived the past.

The detachment, he knew, was together again, all survivors included except himself. Dumanoir, beyond an official blame, had not been punished. But, because the attack had been unauthorized, no one had received citations or promotion—no one except the dead, granted posthumous colonial crosses.

That was not quite just. Vernier, for instance, had deserved something. His severe wound should have counted. He had been waiting several years for the award of the Legion of Honor. As *he* had done his duty, obeyed orders, he should have got it.

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All of them should have received something. Raynal relived the scenes of the combat: Tcharnak's last grin, Mesnil's cheerful smile as he had taken the message, Dumanoir being carried in, his handsome face shattered and bleeding. And the massive shoulders of Vernier, surmounted by that enormous ball of bandages, with the smoke drifting out.

The retreat, the long wait for the planes, then the arrival of the big ambulance machines, all the alternatives of hope and of despair.

HIS glance drifted sightlessly through the smoke-filled glare, rested on a face straight across the room. A round, tanned face, with a short, clipped mustache beneath a blunt nose, fierce eyes overscored by a white welt.

He had seen that face somewhere; he knew the man.

Of course: it was Vernier.

He was amazed. Then he understood how normal it was for Vernier to be here. The troops were resting at this season, Dumanoir had just gone back to duty from leave. Naturally, Vernier had then come on leave in his turn, and to Meknes, as Meknes was the headquarters for the regiment.

No, Raynal corrected himself, no longer *the* regiment, but *his* regiment.

Had Vernier seen him?

Raynal was not sure. The sub-lieutenant was seated with two other Legion officers of his rank, men whom Raynal had never met. It was evident that they were like Vernier, men up from the ranks, not school officers. Serious, solid, sunburnt fellows with square shoulders, tough hands and massive jaws.

Each of them had a girl at his side, but they kept the conversation among themselves. It was not hard to guess what they were talking about: Legion concerns, Legion business, transfers, promotions, the real worth of the new automatic rifle, the quality of the recruits now entering the corps.

Raynal envied them, was hungry to hear such talk. It was none of his business now; he was an outsider. But that talk had been his talk for years.

He waited a few minutes. Vernier's eyes met his, turned away. Raynal was hurt, then thought that Vernier was probably being tactful, that he was waiting for him, Raynal, his superior in rank, to recognize him.

Vernier, he wished to believe, did not wish to intrude. And Raynal smiled at his hesitation. He had not seen Vernier since the man had been helped, sightless, into the cabin of the ambulance plane.

"I see a friend," he muttered.

He rose and circled the table. He felt at once that he must have drunk much more than he had realized, for his legs were not steady. His heart pounded hard inside his chest. He dodged through the couples hopping on the dance floor, came to a halt near the Legionnaires' table. The sub-lieutenant went on speaking.

"—so there I was, transferred to the Colonials! I went to see the Colonel and told him right out: 'Colonel, if I am that lousy an officer—' "

"Hello, Vernier," Raynal said, loudly.

" '—that lousy an officer' "—Vernier glanced up a second, deliberately looked away, and continued—" ' then take away my commission and put me back in the ranks. But in the Legion.' So he said: 'Vernier, you ass—' "

Vernier ceased speaking, changed color. The scar on his forehead now appeared purplish. But he ignored the hand stretched to him. One of his comrades pushed back his chair and rose. He spoke in a very soft voice.

"I beg your pardon, Lieutenant. But this table is for Legionnaires."

"Well"—Raynal laughed—"I used to be in the Legion."

"We know that," the other replied, calmly. But he was embarrassed, growing red. His comrades looked into space.

RAYNAL knew that the reasonable course for him was to turn around and drop the matter. They knew who

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he was and did not wish to talk to him. That was their right. But he resented their attitude. What was he, a leper, that they should shun him?

"What's the matter with you, Vernier?" he said, leaning over the table. "When I am polite enough to speak to you, you might answer."

This time the sub-lieutenant's glance rested steadily on Raynal.

"You might not like my answer."

"Why not?"

"Go back to your pals."

"Listen"—Raynal grew annoyed—"I left the Legion, but—"

"Better go away, Lieutenant," the other Legionnaire said.

"No, maybe I'd better answer him," Vernier declared. "You left the Legion, and that was all right. But you spilled all that could hurt us. Leibenroth, Malthos, myself—"

His voice grew hoarse, tense: "When you saw you were going to get nothing out of the show, you took care that no one else did. You spilled your dirt, then went where you could get yours. But we're not pretty boys with influential friends, who can transfer at will and wear fancy pants. We're plain soldiers, ordinary Legionnaires."

"And what am I?" Raynal protested.

"Want to know? You're a disgusting little swine who couldn't keep his mouth shut. That stink you brought out about your row with the lieutenant put the whole show in a rotten light. They canceled all citations—except those you put in."

"Posthumous citations. Listen—"

"Listen to you, eh?" Vernier struggled to rise, and both his friend and his girl held him back. "Get away before I put my foot on you, cockroach!"

"What's that?"

"Cockroach!"

Raynal started forward; but a meaty, thick white arm caught him under the chin, checked his plunge effectively. Alice was on the job, massive, truculent.

"None of that, or you all go out on ur ear, officers or not!"

"Say that again," Raynal challenged. "What did you say?"

"You miserable cockroach!"

"I forbid you, Vernier, to—"

"You forbid me? You get your name in the newspaper, so what? You didn't have the guts to stay in the Legion and do your job like everybody else. Too much risk for too little credit!"

Vernier was shouting now: "Go on and fly your damn machines! You may be good at that. But when it comes to taking a platoon of Legion to the circus, you just aren't there! Takes a man to do that."

"I've done it, I've done it!" Raynal shouted back.

"Just enough to find out what it was like. Then you got sick of it and got out."

"I got sick of it?"

"You deflated."

"I—I deflated?"

He struggled to leap forward; but even in his rage he could not juggle Alice's mighty bulk and loosen the grip of his friends. He wanted to drive his fists into Vernier's face. Why, but for him the man would be dead. He, Raynal, had taken the detachment to safety, had handled everything—all alone.

"Come away, Paul."

"Let me go. I'll—"

Alice started toward the door, Raynal became the center of a milling group. The Legionnaires were out of sight. There was another altercation at the gate, the rustling of bills as someone paid for the checks.

Then the fresh air of the night struck his face, sobered him up somewhat. "I just want to talk to that guy," he protested. "I won't fight. I'll just explain—"

"No use. They're soreheads, old man," Bercolet said. "Jealous."

Raynal was hurt by this accusation against Legionnaires.

"No. They're all right. They just don't know what—"

He was aghast, sick with humiliation. Those fellows, the sub-lieutenants, would spread the story throughout the regiment —*the* regiment. Throughout the Legion.

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They would say that Vernier had told him off; had told him that he could not take a platoon into action because he lacked the guts. Had told him to his face that he was deflated—after what he had done!

Bercolet was walking him along the street.

"You can't afford to fight. Your name's been in the papers, and anything you do now will go in, too. We know what that is."

"But you heard him. He said that I don't have the guts to—"

"What do you care? He's a sorehead, his opinion can't count." Bercolet added sensibly: "Don't be sore at him or at the others. They're in the Legion. It's the only racket they know, so they've got to make it important. Just as we fellows feel about flying. You know: if a guy can't handle a stick, he just doesn't exist!"

"But I can—I can do anything they can do."

"Sure. Let's go and have a drink somewhere."

The party dragged Raynal to the nearest bar.

Within a few minutes, all were as gay as ever. Except Raynal. He drank mechanically, without joy. The words spoken by Vernier ached in his brain. He had to blink to keep from shedding the tears that welled to his eyes.

Cockroach—deflated—

CHAPTER VI

HERE WAS A COMRADE

IN THE months that followed, Raynal discovered that he was not welcome in Legion gatherings. He won success in his new branch of the service, was awarded the Legion of Honor. But nothing done outside the Legion counts really—for Legionnaires.

Even among his friends in the aviation, he was not wholly trusted. Why? Because his courage had been questioned publicly, and a soldier's courage is like a woman's virtue: the slightest breath tarnishes it.

Then he was asigned to the field at Agadir, for mapping excursions over the Anti-Atlas mountains. The commercial line had a stopover there, and many of its pilots were his friends. Army scandal and gossip never disturbed them.

Bercolet arrived with a new machine being tested by the line for long-distance trips. At the seaport of Agadir, he was finishing the first leg of a huge triangle. He had come over southern France, Spain and Morocco from Toulouse, without stop. He was to fly to Tunis across Morocco and Algeria. Then from Tunis back to Toulouse.

"Get a week's leave," Bercolet suggested. "Come with us. Plenty of room; that bus can carry eight passengers. You make Agadir-Tunis-Toulouse with us, and I'll get you a seat on a machine coming back here. I'll fix it up with your superiors. You can be semi-official, a sort of Government inspector."

"I'd like to." Raynal shook his head gloomily. "But this isn't the time for it. It's a test flight, the newspapers will have reporters meet the plane. I'd get mentioned, my picture would get in the magazines. How would that go with this, after all the gossip that's been floating around about me anyway?"

And he showed a fat headline on a Casablanca newspaper:

MILITARY OPERATIONS IN THE FAR SOUTH

"What's that got to do with you?"

"Read it."

The military operations in the Moroccan South, on the far side of the Atlas, were progressing rapidly. Two mobile groups, composed of Legion, native infantry and auxiliary troops, were closing like the jaws of pincers on numerous native elements commanded by the famous chieftain, Miloud er Brabi.

However, concern was felt over the safety of a field detachment of the mounted company of the Nth Foreign Infantry, which had advanced too far

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and was cut off from communications with the main body. Planes had contrived to drop some ammunition and food, but the situation was grave.

"That your old outfit?" Bercolet asked.

"Yes. It explains further that it's the same detachment that got mopped up before. That all survivors are there, in danger again. Dumanoir's in command, Vernier's his second. But everyone who knows anything about it knows that there's one survivor missing. Me.

"Suppose—well, suppose they don't break through, and can't be helped in time. To have my name as arriving in Tunis in a de luxe passenger plane, appear on the same page as their casualty list would be too much."

"Maybe it's just newspaper gab."

"No. The staff here is keeping in touch by wireless. The detachment is cut off, all right. They're saying Dumanoir was rash again. It may look that way, but I don't think so. The natives seemed to be on the run, and he pursued, as ordered. Suddenly, the slobs counter-attacked, occupied a wide ravine, and left him hung up on a sort of plateau, five or six miles inside their lines."

As he spoke, he had drawn a sketch on the margin of the paper. His face twisted with emotion. "I'm here, doing nothing. You can't know what it means. I lived with those fellows for two years. And they're getting killed—killed. I feel my place is with them."

Bercolet lighted a cigarette.

"I know the feeling. I've waited for radio reports when some guys I'd known years were lost in the fog. And I had to sit still, doing nothing. That's the trade. You must learn to take that, too. Come on; the mail plane is landing. We'll get hold of the pilot and have a drink."

They walked over to the machine, across the field. They had a drink with the pilot before he started out again, down the desolate coast of the Atlantic, toward Juby, Cisneros, Etienne and Dakar in Senegal—thousands of miles of sand.

As Raynal returned to his quarters to change for dinner, his Arab orderly handed him his mail, come a few minutes before.

Only one letter held his attention.

IT BORE no postage stamps, simply the notice: *Army Post*. The address was typed, addressed to his apartment in Casablanca, readdressed to him at Agadir. A small oblong of crumpled, soiled paper.

Dear Old Chap

He identified Dumanoir's writing at once.

You have no reason to like me. I don't know when I shall mail this, except that it will be before going into action. This is a farewell, possibly. Vernier has told me what he called you in Meknes. You know what an honest guy he is, so I didn't have the courage to tell him that he misdirected his reproaches.

I suppose that I have always had a selfish streak, a weakness for my own faults. I could not tell him that if you replied to questions about a row between us, and the punch on the jaw, it was because the investigators had already learned from me, when I was trying to cover myself.

I was wounded and weak, if that's any excuse. You were not to blame, of course, and even those dopes on the Staff, despite my lies, saw the truth and did not blame you.

My only excuse for bawling you out and humilating you that night was that I was afraid of losing you. I knew that I could count on you more than on anyone else. And I was afraid of facing command without you. I had grown accustomed to your help.

I know you would understand and forgive me, as many times before. You were the best and most devoted of friends as long as friendship did not become sheer stupidity for you. For

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your own future, you had to break from me.

But what worries me is the thought of the men who were killed needlessly. When the roll is called and one of the oldtimers still with us answers —I remember the name that should follow, but for me. So when a new man answers the call, it is like a shout of reproach.

There was much more in this vein, reminding Raynal of the oldtimers—Tcharnak, and Colloux, a hard-drinking kid, Mesnil and others.

The letter continued:

You understand what I am trying to say. At the first opportunity, I'll get myself killed decently. After that, use this letter to clear yourself and get what is coming to you all—Vernier, Leibenroth and the rest.

Having sent this letter, which amounts to a confession, I hope that it will give me the courage to carry it through. I need some sort of a menace to shove me ahead; my nerve is gone. Knowing this is written will serve.

Don't pity me for dying. You were a good friend—the best of friends.

Raynal read the letter four times, with a growing feeling of satisfaction. It would clear him. It would end the gnawing thought that many considered him a coward.

Then he felt sorry for Dumanoir; his former friendship, his young man's love for the fellow returned. There was something great in Raoul; he was a man.

In a moment, another thought occurred: Dumanoir had led a detachment into battle against orders—but even the military authorities had gone easy on him, had understood and condoned the ambition and ardor of a young lieutenant. A real soldier's instinct was to attack.

Raynal could not accept public rehabilitation at such a price. It would be a scandal, a scandal for the regiment, for the whole Legion. With the wings of the aviation on his breast, Raynal thought first of his former corps, his real corps.

He must get word to Dumanoir not to talk. He set a match to the letter, burned it. Then a new concern started: Dumanoir, after all, had sacrificed the detachment to his own problems. His weakness was so great that he had needed the spur of a confession in another man's hands to find courage to lead! Even his physical courage had waned.

There were men out there, led by a chap half-crazed from an assortment of fears—fears of the body, of the mind.

An idea, a mad idea, came to him unbidden. He tried to dismiss it, but it returned. At last he drove over to the staff building, up the hill, saw the man in charge of corelating all information concerning the operations.

On an immense map occupying an entire wall, the staff captain indicated the various positions: "That's where Dumanoir's bunch is located. The Chleuh occupy one end of that small plateau. The Legionnaires are there, protected in back by a sheer drop. Good enough defense position.

"Yes, I can find you a duplicate map. Interested, eh? Oh, that's right—you were in the Legion once."

"Could a message be dropped to Dumanoir?"

"I suppose so. The supply planes have been pretty successful in dropping him stuff."

"Thanks."

RAYNAL did not go to his mess to dine, but joined Bercolet and the civilian pilots in the plank restaurant erected near the field.

Bercolet was boasting about the qualities of his new bus: "Closed cabin, you know. Can climb to sixteen thousand easily. If you load her at maximum, she'll go five thousand kilometers."

"When are you starting for Tunis?" Raynal asked.

"Dawn, tomorrow."

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"Could you fly it at night?"

"I wouldn't like to try it, but I suppose I could," Bercolet said. "When I was serving my army time, I was trained for night bombardment. Naturally, I know how to lay a compass course, keep track of lapsed time, of wind."

He jerked his thumb at a quiet, tall, slender young man. "There is the guy who knows all about that stuff, though. Expert navigator, you know, trained for the merchant marine. Eh, Noirtier?"

The other nodded. Raynal drew a rough map on the back of an envelope, jotted down distances. "How much time would you lose making a hook down that way —and straightening out again?"

The others looked at the sketch.

"An hour at most," Bercolet said. Then he looked up at Raynal: "But—listen, that's over unpacified territory. We'd get into a row with the military authorities. And a forced landing would be finish."

"You fellows fly over Rio del Oro. Is it any more pacified?"

"That's in the line of duty."

"You talk like army flyers," Raynal said with a smile. "If what you claim about that new machine is true, there's no chance of a crash. There isn't a single high peak between Agadir and the place, following this line." He indicated with a stroke of the pencil.

"All the handicap is in something imaginary: pacified zone, unpacified zone. What difference does that make in Morocco? If you crash away from an army post, it's all the same."

Bercolet challenged Raynal with a glance.

"What have you in mind? Spill it."

"It would have to be kept quiet until we were off."

"We'll keep it quiet, my little lieutenant! Go on."

"Well, here's the main idea. . . ."

Raynal spoke for several minutes without interruption. The civilian aviators nodded, Noirtier started to take notes.

"I realize that if anything goes wrong, you'll be in trouble," the officer concluded. "Your lives are your own, but you have about a million in material that belongs to your company. It all depends," he concluded with some craftiness, "how much you trust that bus of yours."

"Nervy idea," Bercolet said, after a look at Noirtier.

"Would be too bad not to try it," the navigator agreed. "Sure of your locations? All right, you're on."

CHAPTER VII

DESCENT INTO BLACKNESS

IN THE pit of darkness below, the green fire had died out. Bercolet turned the controls over to Dalbin, his co-pilot, and came into the cabin.

As the plane banked in one of its giant circles, Raynal looked out of the window. He could distinguish earth from sky, but that was about all. Noirtier was checking figures in the notebook, going over his explanations again.

"See, we've located them all right. Now if it were a question of landing in a clearing, for instance, or in a very limited space, I'd say no. But, mathematically, it can be done."

"See here, Raynal," Bercolet said brusquely, "You know the three of us. Not a peep out of us. The idea sounded pretty good back there in Agadir. Out here, over the mountains, it seems different. If you want to change your mind, no false pride, eh?"

"I'm all right."

Raynal clenched his jaws, because he feared his chin might quiver. His whole frame was agitated by a tremor not wholly that of the powerful motor pulling them through the thin air high over the Southern Atlas. Yes, eight thousand feet above the plateau, in the velvety black, the idea did appear fantastic—impossible.

"In any case, we better ask them to set off another flare, to check up," Bercolet suggested.

"No," Noirtier snapped. He added: "I got the bearings the first time. No use arousing the natives with a lot of unusual

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stuff. As it is, they probably think we are a belated supply machine trying to dump some stuff. Just keep circling, allowing for the drift as I wrote down."

"Eh, Gugus!" Dalbin called. The pilot went front and took over. Dalbin was doubling as wireless operator tonight. "You know, the general and his pals are getting very sore down below. Say they asked the isolated detachment to light that flare, as we asked, and what do we want? Why are we hanging around? Don't we know it's dangerous, against regulations, illegal for us to be here? We're asked to leave at once."

"Tell them we dropped a monkey wrench and that we're looking for it," Bercolet snapped. His face was drawn and sweaty.

Despite his nervousness, perhaps because of it, Raynal laughed loudly at the thought of the perturbation they were causing down below. The mobile group must be wondering at this mysterious performance.

Of course, all must know the identity of the machine. The radio at Agadir had reported their departure, and the commercial line's officials were clamoring for news of their progress toward Tunis.

"Not bad!" Dalbin laughed. "The guy says we can go away, that they'll find our tool in the morning and send it along."

"Eh, did you put that crack through?"

"Why not?" Dalbin grinned. "What's the harm in a little kidding? If they can make any trouble for us over this business, they will anyway. So what—" As the plane banked, he broke off to exclaim: "Look at the fireflies!"

"Shots."

"Don't tell me! All right . . ." Dalbin took the controls again.

"Will you be warm enough in those clothes?" Bercolet asked, in the cabin. Raynal was dressed in a woolen Legion uniform. "We must be at eleven thousand."

"He'll be in warmer air in ten seconds," Noirtier said.

"But—"

"I may have to do a little running after I land," Raynal explained. "I don't dare try to land too close to the detachment, for fear of overshooting and going over that cliff at the far end."

He checked the loading of the heavy automatic pistol strapped at his belt. He had to use will power to control his hands. They felt weak, and fumbled.

"Listen, Paul," Bercolet started again, "drop the idea—"

"Leave him alone," Noirtier said quietly. "We said all of that at the start. But it's something he feels he must do. So he'd better get it done, no matter what."

"Right," Raynal agreed, smiling.

NEVERTHELESS, he felt like a man waiting to ascend to the gallows. Unpleasant features of his plan kept looming in his mind. If he succeeded, he might be accused of showmanship, of parading courage. If he failed, he would receive scant sympathy as a fool meeting his proper end.

"Remember, you must take the wind into account," Noirtier resumed. "Six slow counts, not three."

"Yes, yes."

Raynal had made a number of jumps before, but always over a flying field, in daylight. Never at night, from this height, or with the wind nearly as strong.

"Get back there, Bercolet," Noirtier suggested.

The pilot clutched Raynal's shoulders with both hands, pressed hard and turned away without another word.

The plane banked, Noirtier looked down through the window. Raynal kept his eyes fastened on the enameled panel before him. He trusted Noirtier, yet wondered how the man could spot landmarks in the obscurity below.

How could anyone discern anything, know anything, with that black pit beneath them? How could a man's most careful calculations as to gravitation, wind, drift, work out perfectly.

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"Deflating," Raynal thought, stiffening.

There were three men here whom he had talked into a foolish stunt, who risked their professional reputation, their living. They faced serious blame at least, possibly dismissal. Out of friendship for him. No, he could not make the whole excursion ridiculous by quitting at this time.

"I'll brace the door and you stand ready," Noirtier called sharply. "We're almost right. When I tap you, jump. Six counts."

"Understood."

"Anything else?"

"No."

"Ready?"

"Yes."

Raynal fingered the harness of the parachute, then the scarf that held the kepi snug to his head. It would never do to report to the detachment bareheaded. To have full effect, the stunt must be complete.

It was insane, crazy, cockeyed, incredible; but all Legionnaires, past, present and future, would understand and appreciate it.

Raynal would plunge into that dark void, flickering with rifle fire, to rescue something within himself. It was a sublime moment for him, the culmination and revenge for a year of humiliation.

The door opened, he felt the rush of air, forced himself forward. Noirtier had timed things well, gave him no time for the slight change to shake his courage. The tap came at once.

"So long," Raynal shouted, without looking back.

He leaped.

THE wind struck him, tore at his mouth, at the visor of the kepi, then he seemed to pass from a strong gale into quiet air. For an instant, there was an odor of burnt gasoline, a reek of oil, then nothing. Nothing but the crisp, cold air blowing into his nostrils, into his mouth.

Pinpoints of light spun all about him as he tumbled downward. Stars, and shots, and camp fires—and stars again. . . .

"And five—and six—"

He reached across his chest, pulled the rip cord.

The chute caught, he felt a jerk, but not the hardest he had experienced. Immediately, his eyes sought for the plane, and he noticed that Bercolet had switched on the lights. They had decided upon doing this in advance, knowing that the appearance of the riding lights would draw all eyes to the machine and away from the sector of the sky through which Raynal would be falling.

Five miles to go.

Noirtier had calculated the speed of the night wind at this level, and at varying altitudes. The night wind out here blew almost on schedule, he claimed. Always inland from the sea, predictable under normal conditions according to seasons.

And Noirtier knew what he was about, was an expert on climatic conditions, for he had flown from southern France to various points of North Africa for five or six years.

He had stated that the attempt could be made almost sure of success, provided Raynal kept his calm. The greatest peril would be in the jumper's imagination, fevered by darkness and strange surroundings. All that was required, after all, as he had pointed out, was to land anywhere within an area several miles square.

The natives hemming in the Legion detachment, as indicated clearly by their campfires, were almost a full kilometer from the soldier's encampment, scattered in groups along a front three or four kilometers long. It would be only by the worst possible luck that Raynal would land squarely in one of the watched spaces.

Raynal could now discern some of the crests; the ground beneath him was patched with grayer blotches. He could see very plainly the ridges which indicated his general line of direction.

He was dropping fast, but progressing toward his goal as rapidly. He was al-

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most directly over the positions occupied by the mobile group, where several regiments were camped. He could spot them by the embers of fires arranged in regular rows.

It was odd that the people on earth saw nothing but the thick darkness, when he could see everything so plainly. Thus far in Morocco, campfires were screened only from land observation.

As he drifted down and on, one of his great worries was vanishing, the dread of being riddled while hung suspended high in the air. He could now hear faint reports, occasional flashes streaked the night, but no one was shooting at him. The outposts were driving off prowling snipers.

No one had thought to look up, so he remained undiscovered. Fortunately for him, weary fighting men are seldom given to sentimental star-gazing. Noirtier had foreseen this, adding that even if anyone chanced to look up, he would be invisible from below until quite near the ground, when the movement of the big parachute against the stars might be suspected.

But even then, he had claimed, locating the chute exactly enough for straight shooting would be difficult.

Raynal thought that should he accelerate the descent, he would drop inside the French positions, or very close to them. No one would blame him for that; no one could say that he had not miscalculated. He would be safe. The really dangerous part of his journey was still ahead, floating over the natives' positions.

Moroccans of the dissident tribes have no special hatred for aviators, but as aviators are somewhat rarer than other men, they rate special attentions when captured alive. The number of combinations that elderly Berber women can invent for an enemy's flesh and red-hot sickle blades is said to be amazing. Having one's teeth pulled out of the jaws and hammered back into one's skull, as has been reported, is not alluring.

Raynal had determined, should he land too far from the detachment or injured himself when he struck the ground, to cut matters short by turning the pistol on himself.

Death would be sweeter without a prolonged interview with savage captors. If he dropped inside the French camp, however, there would be no death—

Too late.

HE HAD forgotten how swiftly he was moving. The instant had passed, the opportunity was gone, for the French lines were behind him already, up-wind. Those dimmer lights far below were the fires of natives in the deep ravine.

They started to spin, those fires.

Raynal was seized by a sensation of nausea. The muscles tightened beneath his ribs, he felt dizzy. Then he realized what was happening. The air had grown very rough over the ravine; he was oscillating at the end of the shrouds.

He caught at them, to ease those tremendous pendulum swings; then stopped, dreading that if he spilled too much air he would go down rapidly, far short of his goal. This was something that Noirtier had not figured upon!

For long seconds, he wandered across the sky as if flung by a gigantic sling. Then he hung in relative comfort again, knew that he had passed the ravine and was drifting over the long slope leading to the plateau.

He steered himself back into the proper line of direction. When this was done, he had time to look down, and was startled to see a fire very near, so near that he could count the figures huddled around it. He was not more than three hundred feet above.

He restrained a childish impulse to shout down and scare them. He knew too well how rapidly those people recovered from a start, how quickly they could shoot. And why spoil luck that he had not imagined in his most optimistic previsions—coming so close without being detected.

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Yet, when one gave it thought, it was reasonable: The men who were awake at this time were on guard duty. And a sentry in Morocco who looked too often at the sky would not enjoy a long life.

Two or three times, he had to guide the chute back into line. Direction was growing very important now. And every time he hauled on the shrouds, he lost altitude.

Suddenly, what he had expected happened; there was a loud booming above him, a giant rustling. For a second he believed that the chute was collapsing, that he would drop like a stone.

He felt the support of the harness again. But a fifth of a second after, the first shot cracked out from below. Then two, three, six—a dozen more.

Raynal forced himself to calm. Those chaps were not aiming at him, whom they could not see, but at the vague bulk of the parachute sliding across the stars. They were born hunters, skilled marksmen, and unlikely to miss their target by wide enough a margin as to hit him by chance.

Of course, some of those chaps had seen parachutes before. The mountaineers from the rebel zone often went down into pacified Morocco to work as laborers, to earn enough money to purchase cartridges and guns for the fighting season. But it was unlikely that any one of them would think of a parachute quickly enough to decide to shoot below the visible target.

The shots were answered by the Lebels of the Legion sentries. Raynal was startled: the ashes were remote, several hundred yards away. And there was nothing he could do now to rise again.

Then his feet struck the ground, very hard, half-stunning him. He bobbed up once or twice, then plunged forward, knees, toes and palms rasping on the rough soil. He contrived to turn over, worked with frantic haste, his fingers groping for the hooks, unfastening them, as he was being dragged. Then he stood clear, fell down and rolled about, panting for breath.

I've got to get away, he thought.

HE DREW himself erect. His left leg pained him severely. He bit his lips and hobbled off. He went in the direction opposite to that taken by the chute. When he paused for breath, he heard the sound of men running, the slap-slapping of hard bare soles: natives.

They did not spot him, headed for the vague, monstrous shape of the chute collapsing on the ground. They had not understood yet, evidently, were not seeking a passenger so far from his means of travel. He heard the guttural cries of surprise as they reached the silken billows.

Then the slow, methodical fire of an automatic rifle opened from the Legion's lines, and the natives scattered hastily. Raynal, who guessed what would follow, dropped to the ground, crawled into a shallow rut.

A flare arched across the night, bloomed into bluish light.

When darkness returned, Raynal heard the rustling of the cloth as the natives courageously floundered into it, searching, searching. They naturally believed that—passenger or cargo—what they sought was buried somewhere in that unwieldy mass.

For many minutes, Raynal heard their excited whisperings. Several of them passed four or five feet from his hiding place. The pistol butt in his hand grew slippery with sweat.

After an hour, he felt that it was safe to stand.

The pain in his leg had abated. He was sore all over, bruised, but not seriously hurt. He unwound the scarf from about his chin and kepi, knotted it around his neck. Standing in the darkness, he adjusted his kepi at the correct angle for an officer in the mounted company.

His heart was pounding hard, a fierce jubilation gripped him. This was the moment he had waited for, hoped for.

He would walk toward the Legion outposts, attract attention. Then he would walk in, announce himself: "Lieutenant Raynal, coming for his platoon!"

He could identify himself at a distance, by whistling the prelude to the Legion's

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March. He got his bearings, started out. For a hundred yards, two hundred, all went well.

Then, without preliminary challenge, without warning, an automatic burst out furiously. He threw himself to the ground again. The bullets spattered viciously, not very far ahead, on the right.

And, from several points along the line, some of them too near Raynal for comfort, answering flashes slashed the night. The natives had scouts within a short distance of the French position! It would be suicide to try to get further in the darkness.

By dawn, he figured, the snipers would have crawled back to the camps at the other end of the plateau. He could then attract attention by shouting in French, and contrive to walk in. It would be an anti-climax, but it was preferable to being killed like a stray dog, in the night.

He investigated a dark mass nearby, a boulder. No one was there. He crept against the base of it, stretched out. It was a poor ending to his successful jump.

And, as he lay there, he kept thinking that a man hiding and a cobra on its legitimate errands would both seek the same spots—which did not add to his ease of mind or cheerfulness.

CHAPTER VIII

FIX BAYONETS!

RAYNAL was awakened by a distant rumbling. For several seconds, he could not recall where he was; his first thought was that he had been a fool to go to sleep. But how could he have spent his time better?

He felt an intense thirst, multiplied aches throughout his body. Then he examined his surroundings.

He was prone on his side in a sort of shallow ditch under an overhang of gray rock, wedged in very close, screened from the outside by a tangle of grass and brush.

The light was weak, the air cool, so dawn had just broken. The rumbling started again, and Raynal believed it was thunder, for electric storms were not rare in the hills at the season. But in that case, the sky would have been dark, lightning would have flashed.

He grinned as he guessed the simple answer: cannon. The field batteries with the mobile group had opened fire.

He shifted his body until he could peer out through the grass, saw a couple of hundred yards of sloping ground, sparsely tufted, strewn with boulders such as the one under which he had taken cover. Here and there, a runted, twisted tree sprouted from the pebbly soil.

From his position, a slight rise of ground was enough to shut off the Legion's positions. But he figured that it could not be very far off, five, six hundred yards.

He picked up his pistol, examined it. A good thing that he had not fired it! Somewhere, somehow, the muzzle had been plugged with earth. The barrel might have burst in his face. As he had no cleaning rod, he broke off a twig to knock out the plug.

He was about to crawl out and reconnoiter when rifle fire broke out very near. Forty to fifty rifles were in action; yet, for some minutes, he could see no one.

It was one of the strangest sensations in his life. He was squatted between two lines of combatants, having dropped from the sky. No one knew of his presence here. If a stray bullet killed him, it would be years, probably, before some native shepherd discovered his bones under the stone.

At about this time, Bercolet and his companions were nearing Tunis. He might have been with them. Or, in the normal course of things, he would have been on the field, at Agadir, with the roar of the warming motors in his ears, waiting to take off for the southwest. A man was sometimes a fool to trifle with his destiny.

A number of men came over the low ridge, natives. They came fast, on the run, then stopped in the lee of the rise of soil, gathered and talked a moment. Most of

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them were grown warriors, bearded, rangy chaps, very matter of fact.

Several were young boys. One, who could not have been more than twelve, was handling an old flintlock taller than himself.

One of them bandaged a bleeding wound in his thigh, while the others stood about, joking and laughing. The wounded man himself, as he worked, grinned, solid teeth showing in his beard. They were tough people, manifestly they were enjoying this fight.

Suddenly they scattered in different directions. One of them appeared to be headed straight for the lieutenant, who lifted his pistol. At the last moment the fellow veered, skirted to his right, vanishing from sight.

Five seconds later, kepis bobbed into sight, a skirmish line of Legionnaires came over the ridge, advancing, crouching low. Raynal almost shouted when he recognized Sergeant Malthos at the head of the leading group.

THE noncom peered about—swinging his head like a watchful bear, Raynal thought. Other combat groups trickled into view over the ridge at other spots. Raynal recognized many familiar silhouettes, even after a year.

They came on steadily, "oozily." Then there was a shot.

All of them pitched forward headlong. Raynal appreciated the men's skill at taking cover. Only here and there could he detect the crest of a kepi, the white of a hunched shoulder. A flickering of short flames kindled directly opposite him, accompanied by the hammering of an automatic rifle.

The bullets struck the stone, a few feet above Raynal, and the air was alive with screaming mangled metal and chips of rock. Two or three minutes of this, and the Legionnaires rose and lumbered forward. Soon Raynal would be able to signal to them.

Then a report cracked out, not a yard away, and he smelled burnt powder.

Again the soldiers fell prone, vanished. Raynal had understood what was happening. The chap who had come in his direction had taken cover on the flank of the boulder. He looked toward the spot just in time to see a metal muzzle protruding three or four inches.

It wavered up and down slightly, steadied and spurted flame.

Raynal crawled nearer to it. He wondered whether he should grab the gun barrel and yank the man into sight, or merely push his hand around the stone and fire his pistol at random. He reasoned that if he leveled the barrel of his gun with that of the rifle, he could not miss the marksman's head.

The muzzle reappeared, fired, vanished before Raynal could move. He was within less than a yard of an enemy who was completely unaware of his presence. The combat, for the lieutenant, had focussed to this tiny spot.

The muzzle pushed into sight again, quivered as the fellow took careful aim. Raynal rose to his knees, pushed the pistol around the rock, fired. Because of the awkward position, the recoil was painful.

But he had scored a hit; for the sniper rolled into view, clutching at his head with both hands. As he staggered to his feet, he was knocked down again by a dozen shots from the Legionnaires.

They were racing up with the automatic, which they set up again in the lee of the boulder, working with feverish haste. The back of number three, a loader, was not three feet from Raynal. The officer started to speak, but the discharge of the gun covered his voice. He reached out and touched the man's shoulder.

WHAT followed was ludicrous. The Legionnaire turned a sweaty, startled face toward the rock, saw Raynal with his head popping out of the grass within a few inches of his nose, recognized him. The next instant, forgetting the enemy's bullets, he was hopping away.

The gunner, who had been nursing the stock comfortably, spotted his former of-

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ficer, ceased firing, remained stretched with his mouth agape.

The lieutenant's unexpected appearance had silenced the automatic as effectively as a hand grenade explosion. Malthos, the sergeant, came to investigate, running in long strides, pistol ready. He saw Raynal, was startled, but shoved the gun crew back to work before speaking.

"Hello, Malthos."

"Hello, Lieutenant. How did you get here?" The materialization of the lieutenant in the midst of the combat, on this isolated plateau where the detachment had sweltered for three days, smacked of the miraculous.

"Plane and chute, Malthos."

"Late last night. We heard the plane and wondered."

"Where's Lieutenant Dumanoir?"

"Back somewhere—to the left, Lieutenant." Malthos called out instructions to his men, appeared to avoid Raynal's eyes. "Might as well tell you. There's been a little trouble. Mobile group signaled this morning that they would attack hard and clear the ravine, that on our side we were to start to meet them as soon as the artillery opened up. That's what we did, as you see."

Malthos hesitated. "Well, you'll hear about it anyway. Lieutenant Dumanoir had a idea. Wanted to go down the path along the cliff. That meant leaving the mules behind. Lieutenant Vernier doesn't want to leave anything."

Raynal nodded approval of this. A mounted detachment of Legion had *never* abandoned a live mule or a useful piece of material to any enemy—not with the formation unbroken. Knowing Dumanoir fondness for display of originality, it was easy to understand what he was seeking: a spectacular escape.

"Where is he, did you say?"

"Back there, somewhere over the ridge —Lieutenant."

Raynal rose and started to run. The danger was not too great, as he could pick his terrain and the natives were busy fighting the first line. As he surmounted the low crest, he saw Vernier trotting toward the front, but the sub-lieutenant did not see him. Raynal headed down the slope, where the mules were halted in two lines.

News of Raynal's arrival had probably been spread already, for Senior-sergeant Leibenroth saluted him without a show of surprise.

"Lieutenant Dumanoir?"

"The lieutenant has been wounded, Lieutenant." Leibenroth's face was set, hard. "He's over there."

Dumanoir had been laid on the ground, and a brace of Legionnaires were bending over him. The officer had become very thin, appeared very old. The disfiguring scar showed plainly through the bristles of his unshaven cheeks. Raynal knelt beside him, clasped his hand.

"Raoul! How are you?"

"Fine, except that I am dying." Dumanoir smiled faintly.

"What happened?"

"Vernier didn't understand. I didn't want any more dead—dead—"

Leibenroth loomed above the group.

"The lieutenant was hit a while back," he said.

There was a tunic on the ground, a few feet away, with the double stripes of gold fastened to the cuffs: Dumanoir's tunic. For an unreal, fleeting moment, Raynal looked at it, saw the blood stains—and a spot blackened by the point-blank discharge of a gun.

Then Leibenroth noted this, picked up the garment and rolled it up.

"Raoul—you—"

"Made a mess of things to the end, yes." Dumanoir touched the dressing on his body: "Didn't even do that right! But it's only a few minutes. I couldn't—too many dead. There is—there was—too much to go back into. Couldn't get away with it twice. Too many dead."

THE tragedy was recent, for Malthos had not known of it. Raynal felt that he would never know exactly what had happened. Had Dumanoir shot himself to escape facing a court martial for rashness, as he hinted? Or had Vernier, pushed too

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far, taken matters in his capable hands to keep the detachment from abandoning mules and baggage?

"Didn't have you to pull me out," Dumanoir resumed, with a faint smile, "and couldn't imagine you'd show up."

What was the truth? Vernier would never talk, and in this case the Legionnaires would be forever mute. So far as the outside was concerned, Dumanoir must have fallen in action. He would be awarded a posthumous citation, probably.

A runner came up, shouting urgently.

"Lieutenant says to get going—to get going—"

A mule with a cacolet saddle was brought near for the officer. There were six bodies packed on mules, wrapped in blankets. And nine wounded. But the detachment was leaving nothing behind, not a single sound animal, not a pound of useful material, not a single wounded man, not even a corpse. Things were being done in Legion style, as was proper.

He shouldn't be moved, Raynal thought. However—"I'll take his shoulders," he addressed a Legionnaire; "get hold of his feet."

They lifted Dumanoir on to the seat of the cacolet. Blood rushed, flowed through the dressing. The wounded officer reached out for Raynal's hand, smiling, as if in derision.

Under the grime and beard, his features grew childish, relaxed. His lips moved as he tried to speak, he coughed once. Thin pink scum bubbled on his mouth, then blood streaked his chin. The pupils stared at Raynal.

"He's done for, Lieutenant"—Leibenroth touched Raynal's arm meaningly—"and we'd better get going."

"Right."

Raynal ran off without another glance at his dead friend. Grief gripped him, yet he experienced a strange sensation of utter freedom. With the death of Dumanoir, the bizarre hold that had clutched his soul, his spirit, was broken. He was no longer part of another man's future.

He went over the ridge in long strides, and bullets at once sought him. The combat groups of the detachment were fighting furiously, forging across the plateau, knocking the natives back.

Far off, down in the ravine, the tumult of another combat swelled, where the units of the mobile group were battering their way to the rescue.

He overhauled Vernier, who rose from a crouch to greet him.

"He's gone," Raynal announced.

The sub-lieutenant offered his hand. He turned his broad back to the enemy, to the flying metal. He was calm. Perhaps, like Raynal, he felt that death had its toll of the detachment's officers for that day.

"I've learned a lot since I saw you," Vernier said. "Sorry I made an ass of myself."

"Forget it."

Vernier swept the groups with a gesture of one hand.

"Naturally, you're in command."

"I'm here as a volunteer, no official standing," Raynal protested. "In the Legion, I'm under your orders."

He went on quickly, as he saw that his friend was about to demur: "The hardest part of the job was done when I arrived."

Vernier looked at him, nodded thoughtfully.

"Yes. It was hard." Then his hand lifted, pointed. "All right. I assign you to your old platoon. We'll stop fooling around and drive those slobs out of our way."

Raynal snapped to attention, saluted.

"At your orders, *mon lieutenant*."

He ran down the line to his proper station, scorning to stoop. With a glance, he gathered them all to his will. His voice cut clear and sharp through the fusillade.

"Fix bayonets!"

THE END

A Great Novel by Theodore Roscoe
in this week's Detective Fiction Weekly

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Yaqui Gold

It's a dark and savage corner of Mexico, the home of a people who have not been tamed; and an American seeking riches there must dare to accept the ominous welcome of war drums

By E. HOFFMANN PRICE

Author of "King of Knaves," "Red Sea Jonah," etc.

CHAPTER I

SENORITA REDHEAD

THE narrow side walks were crowded with beggars, and with old women selling lottery tickets. Street urchins, skipping no bets, offered a choice of dubious postcards, or garishly colored images of saints.

But Don Wayland ignored the street life of Guaymas, and the tourists also. He brushed both aside, impartially. His eggshell tropicals hung well from broad shoulders; his spotless Panama towered well over the crowd, and Wayland was square and rugged, like his tanned face. Altogether, he was big enough to get away with being in a hurry in Mexico.

Wayland stepped into the patio of the Silver Tower, where broad-leaved plantains rustled, and a fountain scattered cool mist on the diamond-shaped tiles. A waiter with gold teeth and a scarlet sash bowed double, but Wayland was in a hurry. And he needed no guidance.

Lorela was at the usual table, where the green background made her copper-colored hair a splendid blaze.

"Hello, *Rubia!*" He caught the slim hands she extended; he kissed them, and not her generously rouged mouth, for the waiter was catfooting about in the arcade. Anyway, that was an old Spanish custom. *"Que tal?"*

"Que tal yourself, and don't call me *Rubia!"*

Her taffeta skirt rustled as she seated herself in the corner. The afternoon gown was as incredible as the girl. But Guaymas expected Lorela Romero to be colorful; that was her job, even though she was not yet *prima donna* at the Silver Tower. *Esa rubia,* they called her, because of her hair and her cream-colored skin: that redhead, par excellence. So Wayland teased her by mimicking the Mexicans, who insisted that she must have come from Jalisco, where nearly everyone is Gothic blond.

"All right, I won't." The waiter had come in with two chilled dry sherries; no order was needed, not after three solid weeks of afternoon meetings in the patio. "Provided you stop kicking about the danger of flying over the Sierra Madre."

Lorela sighed, and her green eyes became tragic. "But, Don—those Yaquis! If you ever made a forced landing, you and your photographer, you'd never get back alive."

"Dennis—" Wayland grimaced as though he had just bitten into some of the fish scraps that rotted in the boats along the *pescadero.* "Dennis, that big lug, he claims it's an absolutely sound crate he's having brought down."

"You don't like Mr. Dennis, do you?"

"No, I don't." He did not bother to say that much of his distrust came from Elmer Dennis' admiration of Lorela. Dennis was junior member of the firm that employed Wayland, and also controlled the Silver Tower. "And I'd not take his word, if Corey Ledgate didn't back it up."

Lorela studied him with cool exasperation. "You say we'll get married; then, to earn some quick money, you take the

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Wayland's first blow carried the fight out the door of the Silver Tower

most dangerous job in Mexico and the chances are you'll never come back to marry anyone." She leaned forward, suddenly intense. "Don, don't take it. Please."

Wayland, however, persisted. He usually did. "But what'll we live on? I'm practically busted, and I've got to make a stake. Right now. So you can get out of this dump."

"Oh. You don't like the Silver Tower?"

"I don't like it, no. Tourists and the local boys making passes at you."

"Under a blue spotlight, darling." She was aloof now. "After all, there is safety in numbers."

"You don't belong here."

"How do you know I don't?" she challenged.

HE HAD no answer to that. Lorela always hedged and evaded when he tried to cross-examine her. Whether she was a native, one of Jalisco's famous redheads who spoke Americanese, or a Los Angeles girl who had learned Spanish in the Mexican quarter of that city, was an open question. Synthetic name or not, her hair and coloring were genuine, and so were those long-lashed green eyes; genuine in every sense, and Wayland wanted to get her out of the Silver Tower.

"Well, you don't. And I'm flying."

"You are?" She stared at him a long moment, and said slowly: "Then I'm staying here. You idiot—Don, don't you see, I can't let you take that crazy job on my account. If something happened, I'd never forgive myself for having let you try to make a stake the quick way."

"But I had the job—I signed up with Dennis and Ledgate before I met you."

"Well, *I* signed up with Dennis and Ledgate before you met me."

She flicked her fan and went grandly from the patio, lovely ankles twinkling, skirt rustling.

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He might have overtaken her before she reached the archway, but a ragged Mexican brat ducked past the doorkeeper and ran toward Wayland. "*Señor,* the airplane, she has arrive. Meester Keller, he want you to meet him, all at once. By the hangar, no?"

Like nearly every native of Guaymas, the kid was trying to speak English. Wayland handed him a twenty *centavos* copper, and said, "Say it in Spanish, *hombrecito.* Which hangar?"

After all, there was no use pressing the argument with Lorela. He would only make a fool of himself. So he followed his grimy guide and lost only a few minutes finding and awakening a cab driver. Keller, it seemed, had hurried to the landing field and sent a messenger to find Wayland—an easy task, in a place the size of Guaymas.

Poker-faced Indios plodded down the street. They wore straw hats and flapping white trousers; their shirt tails hung out, Chinese fashion. They beat their burros with cudgels, hurrying them toward the market place with burdens of firewood, hampers of oranges, *chirimoyas,* sweet limes. And women in blue skirts walked along, stately as grand duchesses; they balanced bundles of sugar cane on their sleek black heads. Others carried earthern *ollas* of water, or baskets of vegetables. It reminded Wayland of a Moorish city out of a book; Guaymas had all the color and malice of the Orient.

Presently, he reached the outskirts of Guaymas. There dust rose in gray clouds and choked him. Dust plumed up after each footstep as he stamped toward the palm-thatched hangar. There stood a red monoplane with gleaming exhaust stacks. Aside from bald-headed tires, she was neat and trim. So now he could not dodge the problem any longer. He'd either fly, or else he'd have Lorela leading him around by the nose.

JUST inside the hangar, Wayland got a look at the tool room. Herb Keller, his photographer, lay asleep on the work bench. Wadded dungarees pillowed his tow-head. He was snoring, and the flies did not bother him.

"On your feet, lug!" Wayland shook him. "Snap out of it."

"Uh—um—oh, hello, Don. You took all day. I bet you was with Lorela, in the pot-io, huh?"

Wayland snorted. "Jerk that prop," he said, and got into the cockpit. "Where's the guy that flew her down?"

"No reason hanging around, I told him there was not a chance of getting your job."

The engine caught, roared. Wayland pulled the throttle to idle, and leaped to the ground. "So we're going to fly this junk heap over the Sierra?" He pointed at the snow on the far-off peaks. "This, over them?"

"Jeez, Don, she looks nice—"

"Looks? Mug, try *listening.* Gun her out of a tough spot and she'll blow up."

Keller waddled nearer. "Sounds good. I want to get to work. I dropped too much bucking the wheel at the Silver Tower. Sometimes I think the dice are educated and the wheels too."

"Listen to those con rods, Herb!"

Keller frowned, cupped his big paw to a cauliflower ear. Before learning that he was an expert photographer, he had pushed leather. Also, a lot of leather had been pushed at him, much of it connecting around the head. Hence, the ears, hence the nose. Wayland, who could never pose for the gentleman in the whiskey ads, was positively handsome when he used Keller as a background.

"Sounds nice, Don. Uh-huh. Sweet, if you ask me."

Wayland spat. "That hunk of iron would knock itself to pieces, up there. I don't see how it ever flew down."

Keller rubbed his pile-driver chin. "I seen Harper landing it."

Wayland cut the ignition. The engine really did not sound bad, except to a sensitive ear: and Wayland had that. "Let Harper take her up!"

"Aw, Don." Keller's heavy face and

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little eyes showed pain and perplexity. "I lost my dough in that game, I'll have to hock that Fairchild."

He gestured toward the little corrugated-iron inclosure in one corner, a combination of workshop and storeroom. On the bench was the gimbal-mounted mapping camera which he had brought down to fit into the plane for a test flight. He had picked it up at a salvage sale; a new one cost around three thousand dollars, U.S.

"Nuh-uh. She'll shake out every rod. There are probably twelve of them, though for a second I had my doubts."

"Listen, you can fix it. You know engines."

"That's why I'm kicking." Wayland was relieved at having a just complaint; by the time Dennis and Ledgate could get a new plane from California, he might talk some sense into Lorela. "No suicide pact for me."

Keller wiped sweat from his forehead. "Say, are you so nuts about Lorela you're afraid Elmer Dennis'll grab her while you're off the ground?"

But Wayland was not listening. He jammed his hat down a little further. He leaped into the waiting taxi and slammed the door. The roar of the engine drowned Keller's yell. It did not occur to Wayland that his photographer, who had dismissed his own cab, would be stranded a mile outside of town, for the mapping camera was too heavy to carry, and too valuable to leave in the flimsy shop.

It was not until he dismissed his cab at the offices of Dennis and Ledgate that Wayland remembered Keller. So he sent the cab back, and then went up the dusky stairway to the second floor. The company had taken over the old Figueroa mansion; they had done no remodeling that would mar the severe XVI Century architecture, and thus they paid a compliment to what Keller called the "refined people" of the town.

Dennis and Ledgate, anticipating the completion of the West Coast Highway from Arizona to Mexico City, were firmly entrenched in Guaymas. They had plantations, fisheries, pearling boats, and now, with the Silver Tower and a shot at tourist money, the partners had the town on a downhill pull. It was not clear to Wayland where an aerial survey fitted into the company's activity—but he had not asked questions.

He hoped, indeed, that loose-lipped Keller would refrain from queries. The customer might decide that, after all, no survey was needed.

The sun spun dazzling patterns on the beamed ceiling of the office. Whirring fans made whirlpools of the fragrant smoke of the big man's cigar. Elmer Dennis looked up when Wayland jerked the door open. He barely got his Scotch brogues from the desk when Wayland's challenge came from the doorway: "That crate that just came from Burbank! If you think I'll take it up, you're nuts!"

Dennis looked like Keller with a touch of shrewdness added, and that last spoiled the big blond man for Wayland. He objected to the hearty voice and gesture. That hearty voice was saying, at this moment: "Now, what's the trouble, what's wrong?"

"That chunk of iron is something from a scrap heap. Fly it yourself!"

"Listen, guy." Dennis began to scowl and rumble. "You've kicked about every plane in Guaymas. That amphibian we could have gotten right away. And that one the Cuahtemoc Air Lines offered us."

"This is worse! If you think the chump that flew it down here is going to take my place, you're crazy. Herb Keller won't fly with him. Maybe you can find guys that think they're pilots, but where's your photographer?"

"Oh, so you got us cornered, huh?" Dennis shifted his cigar, spat past it, and grinned maliciously. He pushed a bell. A secretary came in. "Write this tramp a check, right now!" Then, to Wayland: "Griper, you're fired, and I'll take the damn pictures myself before I'll let you run me around like this, do you get it?"

"Fired? Fired? Why, you—I'm quitting!"

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The secretary came in with Wayland's check before the two men had actually begun pushing each other around. Wayland left, slamming the door; not wrathfully, but for emphasis. He was thinking: Three weeks' pay. With their stalling, I earned it, plenty. And for good measure, I'm walking out with Lorela, and see how he likes that!

After all, Keller had his pay coming, and it would be a stake back in the states. So Wayland went to the Silver Tower to tell Lorela the good news.

CHAPTER II

GO FIND A MINE

WHEN Wayland returned to the Silver Tower, Lorela had left. He phoned her hotel. No one knew where she had gone, though out of politeness, fantastic guesses were made; not to deceive Wayland, but merely to avoid the brusqueness of saying, "I don't know."

He drove down the *playa*, but nowhere along that lovely crescent of white sand and cobalt blue water did he find a trace of Lorela. And that cut the search. It shocked him a bit to realize how little he knew about the friends and background of the gorgeous *rubia*.

Eating at the Silver Tower ran into money, so Wayland stepped into the dirt-floored Cantina de Los Tres Hermanos. He ate *tacos* and drank beer, and listened to a troupe of itinerant musicians whang their guitars and sing *El Rancho Grande*.

The first floor show at the Silver Tower was over when Wayland arrived. The crowd was scattering. During the past couple of weeks, he had been wondering if Dennis and Ledgate had not bitten off just a little too much, trying to add tourist entertainment to their other enterprises. Most of the customers were Mexican. They ate at home, and then came in to linger over a drink, while waiting for the second floor show.

In an alcove not far from his table was an American whom Wayland had noticed several times during the past week, mainly because there was no tourist look about him. He did not carry a camera, and the street vendors did not offer him their wares; they treated him just as they did the many English and American residents of Guaymas, and yet, he was a newcomer.

His shirt was rumpled, his tropical worsteds had not been pressed for a long time, and he squinted at the wine list as if he could not tell the difference between English and Spanish. Also, he smoked a pipe. A curved, black pipe, loaded with a man's mixture, a blend of honest Perique and Latakia and a touch of Havana, Wayland decided, catching a whiff. Not a trace of vanilla or chocolate; an unobtrusive mixture that not everyone would suspect of being expensive. He lolled back in his corner, ordered beer, and smiled to himself. He seemed amused and content with his own company.

Then Wayland forgot the middle-aged stranger who had begun to shape up, somehow, as the sort of fellow one would like to know. Lorela Romero was returning to the dining room.

They'd stay, now that they had a whiff of her perfume, and heard the rustle of her chartreuse gown. The long train rippled over the tiles; her feet were only an occasional golden twinkle. Fantastic sleeves moulded her arms and hid her knuckles. The sleek lines of that gown, accented by a collar so high it forced a tilt to her chin, created the illusion of height. This was not a dress but an act: and the tribute was a moment of silence.

But for the red hair, Wayland would hardly have recognized her. Lorela looked over the heads of the gaping customers. Her destination had been picked. Her eyes wavered for an instant when she saw Wayland. He would have been surprised if there had been any further sign of recognition. This was part of her work.

That long moment of silence before the Mexican customers began to yell, hurl flowers and coins, dismayed Wayland. Lorela was knocking them cold. Unless the Silver Tower folded in a hurry, she'd have a job he could not induce her to quit.

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JUST ahead of Lorela, a round-faced man with the color of a cordovan boot waddled from his table, faced her for a moment, then pretended to recoil, dazzled and shading his eyes. His brows rose. He raised his right hand, made an almond-shaped figure with his thumb and third digit; then he leered, rolled his eyes, winked past his uplifted hand.

"Ay-y-y-y-y-y!" He exhaled, and pounded his barrel chest.

This pantomime was only the conventional lusty admiration. Lorela's pace did not waver. But as she turned toward the table she was to occupy, something broke her stride. She started to raise a hand, then let it drop. She was tense now, no longer studiedly graceful. Wayland could not hear what she said, for there was too much cheering. But he saw her staring at the middle-aged American; and then she was moving swiftly toward his table, and the shabby man had got abruptly to his feet. He stood, his face curiously changed, until Lorela seated herself.

Wayland could not piece it out by their obvious excitement; he knew only that the meeting had shocked them both. And now Lorela and the shabby man tried to talk at once. Both spoke in fierce whispers; for when the applause subsided, Wayland could not get a word of the exchange.

"Who's trying to sell who and what?" he asked himself.

In a few minutes, the shabby man shrugged, made a gesture of resignation. He beckoned to the nearest waiter. He peeled a bill from his roll, and went to the nearest door. He had a springy, energetic walk that belied his age. And then Lorela said to the waiter, "Why did you seat him at my alcove?"

"But, *señorita,* over there, that is your table."

"Maybe that's what they told you," she said. "But it's all right."

But Wayland was certain that Lorela had slipped when she betrayed her interest in the shabby man. Now she was trying to cover up.

Presently, he went to her table. She shook her head. "After the show, Don. I'm sorry, but this table is reserved for an important guest."

The delivery was a little too breathless, too unconvincing. Wayland froze up. "Okay, maybe later."

Within half an hour, Elmer Dennis joined Lorela at her table. The lights dimmed. The blue spot picked him and the girl from the shadows of the alcove. The drums rolled, and Wayland did not know why the sound reminded him of a prelude to an execution. Probably Mexican drummers couldn't help it; just habit.

Dennis rose and addressed the house in Spanish, following each line by its English equivalent. It was an elaborate speech, full of florid complements to Lorela; but finally he reached for her hand. She rose, and swirled clear of the table, just as he said, *"Caballeros y damas*—the new *prima donna* of the Silver Tower!"

Wayland got up and said, "Hell." No one heard him; there was too much applause. He was thinking how much harder it would be to make her leave the Silver Tower. Perhaps it would be impossible; perhaps she'd simply put him to one side now. He remembered how Keller had said, "That red headed broad'll make a chump of you yet." Yet she'd been deeply in earnest when she begged him not to take the flying job.

A heavy hand settled on his shoulder, just as he stepped into the patio. "Just a second, Don," the man said. "Don't hurry out."

It was Dennis. Wayland recognized the voice, which was friendly enough. But Wayland was fed up, and his control broke completely. He whirled. "Get your hands off of me, wise guy!"

He uncorked a punch that slammed Dennis against the stucco. That checked the conversation, though the sound effects were good. Dennis came back, and heavily enough. Just as Wayland said, "New *prima donna,* huh?" his employer smacked home with a one-two that made the fountain and the stars swirl together in what looked like a carnival parade.

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Then Wayland tripped and did a back flip into the fountain. He popped his head against the coping. That neutralized the reviving effect of cold water. From somewhere, he heard Dennis bawling, "Juan! José! Dump the fool into a cab and see he gets home!"

And this was done before Wayland could effectively give himself a hand.

THE following morning, a hammering at his door awakened Wayland. Keller was saying, "Snap out of it, you, and come down!"

"What for?" Wayland fumbled for his clothes. His head ached.

"Somebody wants to see you, right away."

"Tell 'em to jump in the Gulf!" Wayland stumbled toward the door. He thrust his head out and said, "What's the idea of waking me—oh, all right, where'd *you* come from. I quit, didn't I?"

Elmer Dennis was standing in the hall, waiting for Keller to get results. Corey Ledgate, the big boss, was there: dark, imposing, with his commanding nose and steady eyes.

"Good morning, Don." He waved Dennis aside. "I'm sorry about that plane. Elmer told me you didn't like it. And that you're leaving town. I'd like to talk this over."

Wayland shook his head. "I'm sick of this whole setup."

"Why not take a day out and really look at that engine?" Ledgate's persuasive voice was already making Wayland grope for a tactful answer. "The chances are you could fix it. If you take off the day after tomorrow, we'll give you a bonus."

"Get it?" Keller cut in. "A bonus."

Ledgate went on coolly, pleasantly: "This survey is to locate the Lake of the Gods. A landmark for finding the lost Tiopa Mine."

"Huh?" Keller gave Wayland no chance to speak. "Tiopa? You're crazy, Mr. Ledgate. It ain't possible. Mines, yeah, but not that one."

"I mean, Tiopa," Corey Ledgate said, smiling indulgently. "It is worth a million. Ten million, perhaps."

"How much bonus?" Wayland asked; everyone in Mexico or along the Border had heard of that famous mine.

"Ten percent of the stock we are issuing. I mean, ten percent to be divided between you and Keller, instead of salary."

"Corey!" Dennis turned to his partner. "Are you crazy?"

"I said ten," Ledgate repeated. "Wayland and Keller deserve it. It is risky work, and it should be rewarded."

Dennis scowled, finally shrugged. "Oh, all right." He turned on Wayland. "Will you work on that engine? We can't humor your notions much longer."

Wayland pondered. He could pull up the bearings, meter the oil flow. A man has to take a few risks. He said, "unless it's lots worse than I think, she's as good as in the air."

A few hours later, he and Keller were at work with a chain hoist, pulling the engine from the plane. The trouble seemed to be in the crankshaft. He sent it down to a marine shop on the *pescadero,* to have it trued up. He said to Keller, "You watch this fellow, I've got to see a guy about something."

"Guy, huh," Keller said; but Wayland had missed that.

He was flagging a cab. His destination was Lorela's hotel. If she thought her *prima donna* business was something decisive, it was time she heard that he was flying. She might as well get used to it.

He found her in the patio. She looked up when she heard his footsteps, and ran to meet him. "Don, you weren't hurt last night? There was nothing I could do, and I was frightened." Then, before he could speak: "Wasn't that marvelous—the new *prima donna* of the Silver Tower? Darling, I won't be unreasonable about your job. It'd be wonderful if you mapped the Sierra Madre, and discovered the lost Tiopa Mine. You'll go, won't you?"

He stared at her, amazed. Her sudden approval of the job, her strange excitement over it—he could not understand that. But

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he said quietly: "Sure, I told you all along, it wasn't dangerous. But what do you know about the mine?"

"You might know news travels in Guaymas!" She laughed softly, and he did not protest at the evasion; he was too deeply puzzled. "I've been a fool to try to stop you."

He had been annoyed at her stubborn objections to the flight; but he was not exactly pleased to have her urge him to risk his neck. Then the vivid gaiety in her face and the warmth of her gray-green eyes made his doubt and his annoyance vanish. Presently he was saying, "All right, now how about getting married? We each keep our jobs. Well, I mean, we won't try to crab each other's job."

"Yes," she murmured. "But not until the survey is over. You see, if we were married, I'd not want to keep my job. And right now, you're just being paid in stock, and what would we eat?"

So he left with a kiss and a promise. But deep within him there lingered the uneasy suspicion that Lorela had not been too much slandered by Keller.

CHAPTER III

LAKE OF THE GODS

TWO days later, the red plane was ready to take off. The morning was almost cool when Wayland watched three laborers wheel the crate out of the hangar. Keller set the camera into its gimbal mounts, checked the wiring connections, laid out his maps, and then turned to Wayland to make a last minute review of plans, routine, signals. In that open cockpit job, no voice on earth could compete with the engine roar, so signals were needed.

"Now look here, Herb," Wayland said, "in case I wigwag for you to bail out, you bail out then and there, or I'll cold caulk you and dump you out. Get it?"

"Don't be a sourpuss. Didn't she sound grand when you revved her up after we put her together?"

"That crankshaft looked about perfect. Plenty good enough," Wayland admitted. "So did those rebabbitted bearings. So did everything they did in that machine shop. But you don't know Mexican mechanics. They mean well. They put their hearts into their work. But they just don't have the background like an American. They aren't raised with gadgets around them, or anyway, their old folks are still thinking in ox-cart language. So they take short cuts sometimes."

"You mean—" Keller puffed and wheezed as he jammed himself into the narrow cockpit. "In thirty, forty years, they'll have really high-grade grease monkeys down here?"

But the roar of the engine drowned the answer to that one. She stuttered a bit, then smoothed out; the whole twelve hitting, and not even Wayland's practiced ear could find real cause for frowning. She was not perfect, no. But she could be worse, and still be all right.

He released the footbrake, gunned her, and taxied over the bumpy private field. He ruddered southwest, then took her off into the wind. Power, lots of it; she swooped up, and Wayland banked her to the right when he saw the railroad bridge below.

Keller tapped his shoulder. Gesture and signal and lip reading was now the only way to communicate. Wayland nodded, swung toward El Tigre, the landmark; one of the few whose location was at all accurately spotted on the sketchy Mexican ordnance maps.

To the left rear, Baja California rose out of the Gulf, a black ribbon of volcanic waste. There was fresh snow on the high peaks of the San Pedro Martín Range; even as low as five thousand feet, it was chilly. Just a backward glance, and then Wayland concentrated again on uncharted Yaqui land.

The river wound in and out among the bare hills. Clumps of live oaks looked like dark green thumb-tacks. The foothills were turning green. They had been brown only a week ago.

Now the Rio Yaqui was like a coiled rat-

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tler. White, frothy water could be seen even from Wayland's elevation. To the left of the river were the glittering rails of the narrow gauge line that ended at Tonichí. A train puffed along, opposite Rio Chico; now and then, a plume of steam came from the laboring engine, but the plane's roar drowned out the yell of the whistle.

As the plane neared the higher mountains, the country became the relief map of a nightmare planet. Deep *barrancas* gashed the terrain. Rocky ledges forced the river to double back on itself so that it often traveled twenty miles to come one mile nearer its final destination, the Gulf of California.

Finally Wayland identified El Tigre—an ice pinnacle reaching above the clouds. Winter had come early to Yaqui land. Straight below were the thatched roofs of Suaqui, where the river turned sharply eastward. Joining it, from the north, was Rio Montezuma. Keller nudged Wayland, and signaled twelve thousand.

That was the altitude to hold, and with the least possible variation, else the photos would not match. Wayland leveled off, but with cross winds, pockets, eddies, keeping level was a task. He had to fly her every minute, every second. This was the equivalent of piloting a racing car over a bumpy road that had a deep layer of sliding gravel added for good measure.

Then there was an even more difficult problem; that of gauging the overlap, when the plane reached the end of a north and south run, and had to slip just far enough east before paralleling the first strip. Altogether, mapping was not like other flying, or Dennis and Ledgate would not have put up with Wayland's objections to a succession of planes.

NOW they were over the heart of Yaqui land; the last refuge of the die-hard Indios who, bombed out of their fertile *mesas* some years previous, still distrusted the new regime's actual friendliness.

Years might pass before the conciliatory policy of President Cárdenas convinced the once oppressed Yaquis that they were now Mexicans and not savages. And to guard these mountaineers against encroachment, the government refused to send punitive expeditions if they bushwhacked prospectors. Whoever entered Yaqui land did so at his own peril. Any stranger was fair game for Yaqui arrows or bullets.

Swirling mists now hid the river and the timberline; only a few peaks showed above the milky fog. Keller was gesturing, and trying to outroar the propeller. Wayland could not get a word, but he caught the idea that the photographer was trying to convey: Keller wanted him to get under the clouds; otherwise taking pictures would be impossible.

Wayland grinned at the photographer's excitement and made a reassuring gesture.

When the mist lifted, the plane was not alone. Ahead, a *zopilote* appeared, soaring easily, dipping lazily from side to side. A second, a third and a fourth black scavenger joined the first one. They seemed to have an appointment with the red plane, these followers of death.

Wayland winced at the sight of *zopilotes* flocking to a feast. The omen was unpleasant, and more than that, one of the scavengers might be sucked into the propeller blast. That could knock off a blade.

It was uncanny how they sensed the first signs of death in the mountains. Somewhere, a mile or so below, a Yaqui hunter may have killed a buck. Perhaps a mountain sheep had misjudged a leap and had been smashed on rocks at the end of a thousand-foot drop. However they learned, the *zopilotes* knew that the close of day would bring them food.

But they were not settling. Their meal was not yet ready. They might have spotted a prospector, one of the dozen or so fools who ventured into the mountains every year. Few ever returned, and the birds knew this.

Then the clouds parted. Keller tapped Wayland's shoulder, and pointed. They were almost directly over a crescent-shaped lake, all agleam in the sun, some four thousand feet below. There was something

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eerie, unnatural about the lake. Wayland dismissed that impression in an instant, telling himself that the change of color, from blue to crimson, was because the swirling mists acted as a filter. But it was unpleasantly lurid, that momentary glimpse. Ducks rose from the reeds. They were black against the glare of that curiously shaped, artificial seeming lake.

Artificial. That was it. The lake was no natural thing. Wayland remembered how he had felt the antiquity of that causeway at the outskirts of Mexico City, the one that separates Lake Texcoco and Lake Zumpango: the oldest highway in North America. Here was something equally archaic. Hand made. And with a personality. This must be the Lake of the Gods.

SUDDENLY, without the least warning, the steady drumming of the engine became a clattering, an insane clang and rattle. Wayland knew instantly, and with a quick surge of fear, what had happened. A bearing had let go. In another moment, the engine might shed its con rods, tear itself loose from its mounting.

Banking sharply, Wayland got his first whiff of smoking oil. He gestured to Keller to bail out.

Oil pressure was way down. Temperature way up. When Keller did not move, Wayland repeated the signal, and vainly yelled, "Get out, you fool; she'll blow!"

He cut the ignition. But the prop still turned, beating the air that howled past. And the loose bearings still clattered. There was a bare chance of landing. The stretch of level shore along the lake was at least a relief from the rocky pinnacles and granite minarets that broke up the rest of the plateau.

Something smacked through the fuselage. Keller, trying to remove his camera from the gimbals, paid no attention. But Wayland saw the flash from a ledge above the lake. He was grimly certain what was happening when another smack took a handful of glass from the instrument panel. Bullets were welcoming the visitors to Yaqui land.

Keller bailed out. Cross winds fought Wayland as he tried to work the crippled plane clear of him. There were not many hidden marksmen, and they were not firing rapidly. In the days when he had taken planes from Addis Ababa to challenge Italian flyers, there had been real hell—machine guns from the ground, and shrapnel. This would be a laugh, but for that engine.

That engine. He might have known that no Mexican machine shop outside of the capital was equal to operating on a crankshaft. Something had gone wrong. Maybe in line-reaming the bearings. But there was no use cursing the Mexican mechanics now. Below, he saw Keller's parachute blossoming out. The dangling figure seemed to be clutching an armful of something. That big Fairchild camera. Keller would rescue that, regardless.

Wayland maneuvered toward the curved shore of the lake. It was difficult to clear a rock barrier ahead, but he made it. He swooped over a group of tall men—the Yaquis, ready to receive him. They scattered like quail in the deeping dusk. Rifle slugs smacked past him. The plane settled sharply. Jagged rocks tore off her landing gear, and a tire let go.

Wayland, though half-stunned by the shock, groped for his canteen and his pistol before he had started crawling out of the cowling. Drums were rumbling, muttering, growling. He could hear everything, now that the rush of wind no longer deafened him. He heard the shouting, but the men were visible only when they darted from one ledge to another. Lean, half-naked men; their hair was bound with red flannel.

There was a chance of hiding in the tall reeds. There were only half a dozen Yaquis, as far as he could see. There were nine shots in his Luger. If they rushed, they'd swamp him. If they had to hunt, he might snipe them, one at a time. He wondered if Keller had snatched the pistol from the observer's seat.

But the Indios were not charging the plane. They were halting at the margin

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of the lake. Falling dusk blurred them. One gestured and yelled. The pack whirled, retreating. Then Wayland knew why, and he groaned.

It was Keller, in even greater danger than Wayland. His sudden cry of terror indicated that he had only now perceived the Yaquis. He was some distance from the lake, and well north of the crashed plane. But the Indios were heading swiftly for him, and he was probably unarmed, and hampered with a parachute.

Why they did not rush the plane, Wayland could not guess. Perhaps they thought that Keller was alone, a pilot who had abandoned his ship.

Wayland scrambled from the riddled cockpit. As he ran desperately, his gun in his hand, he heard the drawn-out, frantic yells; the Yaquis had Keller now. Those cries stretched and stretched into terrible waves of hysteria. Wayland had never heard a man cry out that way. They were taking their time about killing Keller.

They were taking their time because they had a valuable prize. The skin peeled from a white man's back makes the best drum heads, the kind that give the high-far-and-clear note that no goatskin or any Indian's skin can give. That was the torture Keller was suffering, Wayland knew; and he strained furiously to get all his strength into his running. Yet it seemed to him that he moved very slowly, in long, deliberate bounds; it was the way he leaped in dreams, when he could soar from cliff to cliff, like a bird.

The shooting was good. There were half a dozen Yaquis clustered about Keller. They were so intent on their prize that Wayland's advance caught them flat-footed. He fired from a scant twenty yards. Deliberately, as on a target range. He carefully squeezed the trigger for each shot. This was not fighting, it was butchery. And those hard-bitten Yaquis were human enough to run, howling, when three dropped.

One more shot: a laggard pitched face forward. Then Wayland was near enough to see that they had only started to flay Keller's back. Wayland cut the groaning man from the blood splashed shrouds of the parachute. He was apparently not fatally wounded. Wayland half-carried, half-dragged Keller toward the grounded plane.

There would be at least a short respite before two men, on foot, tried to outwit Yaqui land.

CHAPTER IV

MEXICO FOR SALE

ELMER DENNIS had his mouth hardened about the soggy remains of an Orizaba cigar. He leaned back in his swivel chair, cocked his feet on the sill of the window which overlooked the cobalt blue of the bay, and disgustedly shook his head.

"Damn it," he said to Corey Ledgate, "if Wayland hadn't cracked up that plane, we could begin to get bankers interested in our prospects."

Ledgate shook his head and said calmly: "We don't actually know that he cracked up."

Dennis bit the tip from a fresh cigar and spat the tobacco halfway across the office. "What do you think'd keep him and Keller in the Sierra Madre this long? Playing marbles with the Yaquis?"

Ledgate was unruffled. "I have been wondering, I admit. So I sent Harper out scouting. Just on the chance that Wayland may have survived a crash, and needed help."

"If you ask me, that's a waste of time and money. If they crashed, there's not a chance in a million. Did you wire Chihuahua City? They might have landed on the other side of the Sierra."

Ledgate's slow smile and show gesture quieted the outburst. He said, "Let me ask one. I would like to know why and how Gilbert Frayne got out of Guaymas, right under your nose. The minute I turn my back, you go to your private table at the Silver Tower to swill rum and make love to your new prima donna."

Dennis' feet crashed to the floor. "I was keeping an eye on him. But why

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should I get worried about a frowsy looking little cluck that smokes a pipe? We don't know how long he was hanging around before we got wise to him."

"Keeping an eye on him was not enough. I don't like his sudden disappearance."

"Didn't I fix it up so no one in town would furnish grub or burros or porters or anything for him?"

"So he left on foot, and without rations? Alone, heading up the Rio Yaqui."

Dennis spat and missed the shining cuspidor. "That Yaqui of his. That pie-faced Chayoga fixed things. While Frayne sat around looking dopey, or asking fool questions at the hotel desk, that damn Yaqui organized everything. Probably in Tonichi."

Corey Ledgate carefully selected a cigarette from his case. "You're a fool," he said, pleasantly. "I told you, the first time I saw him in town, that he'd cause us a lot of trouble."

Dennis made an angry gesture. "This gets us nowhere. He's gone. He's crazy for trying. If you think he'll come back alive, you're crazy. I think it's fine."

Dennis had scarcely finished when the door opened, and a girl with long, lovely legs and red hair came in swiftly without knocking.

Dennis said, "Hello, Lorela! Long time no see."

"Where is he?" She caught his arm. "When does he come back? Tell me!"

"You mean Don Wayland?"

"Yes, yes." She stood over him, and her voice was quick and urgent. "What has happened to him? You sent him on that crazy, dangerous flight—"

Dennis brushed back his sandy hair. "Now, wait a minute, honey. He's all right. They carry parachutes these days." He glanced at his watch. "Come on. We'll have lunch and a drink, you and me."

Lorela shook her head, and said with more Mexican accent than Wayland had ever heard her use, "No, I am not hungry. I am not thirsty. Please, I am too broken-hearted and worried."

Dennis looked at her narrowly. "You're nuts about that big lug of a Wayland."

"Too much," she said, and dabbled her eyes.

Dennis shrugged and got up. "Let's go. Lunch and a drink, huh?"

THEN the door with the wrought-iron hinges opened, and a stocky man in a leather helmet and sheepskin jacket came in. He blinked, trying to get used to the cathedral dimness. Lorela said quickly: "You're the new pilot?"

"One of the best, too." He grinned and nodded casually at the two men. "Got back fifteen minutes ago," he said. "Say—"

Dennis made warning gestures, but stopped when Lorela turned toward him. "Okay, Harper," he said. "See me after lunch, huh?"

"Don't be in such a hurry. I came to tell you I found Wayland's crate. Buzzards circling around it. All cracked up."

Lorela made a small, choked cry; she put her hands out in a broken gesture, and her slim body swayed.

Harper said, "Hey!" and caught her arm. "Take it easy," he said, and looked blankly at Dennis. "What hit her?"

"You chump, she's nuts about Wayland."

"Yeah? That's tough. Listen, Dennis, I know a cameraman in San Antone that can shoot rings around Keller, and anyone who says Wayland could fly is punch-drunk. This guy from San Antone has an automatic Fairchild roll-film outfit. It's in good working order. Now look—"

But he did not finish. Lorela took a quick step toward him, and her hand struck him sharply on the face. Her lips parted, but she did not speak. She turned and ran from the office.

Harper stared after her, rubbing his face. "Boy!" he said. Then he grinned. "I guess I shouldn't have made that crack about Wayland, huh? I kinda forgot."

"Women don't understand you," Dennis told him. "Say, did you land and look at the wreckage?"

"Did I land? Haw!" Harper slapped him on the shoulder. "Listen, mister. You look

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at my fuselage. I counted fourteen bullets and enough arrows to make her look like a porcupine. I think Wayland must have done something to those Yaquis; they don't like strangers."

Corey Ledgate said musingly, "Ferocious savages jealously guarding tribal secrets . . . I'll have that printed into the new prospectus. . . . Elmer, did you notice anything odd about your new *prima donna?*"

"Odd? No. What?"

"It seemed to me that she switched her Spanish accent on and off pretty glibly."

Dennis stared. "What do you mean? So what?"

"Could the lady be putting on an act for our benefit?" Ledgate asked, smiling without humor. "I hope that when you've told her how you love her, you have not said very much about the Tiopa Mine."

THE moon had not risen high enough to reach into the blackness of the Rio Yaqui gorge. On the north bank, a driftwood fire picked out the thousand-foot drop of the nearer wall. Red glints danced on the water, except where it whipped itself to a froth about the rocky tongues that cropped up from mid-channel.

Near the fire sat a middle-aged white man: Gilbert Frayne, that same pipe-smoking, carelessly dressed man whose appearance at the Silver Tower had caused Lorela such concern. He had moved rapidly since leaving the night club.

Judging from the ashes and charred wood accumulated near the rocks that shielded the cooking fire, the camp had been on that ledge for several days. Presumably the native porters and burro drivers had been waiting for Frayne, who could scarecly have arrived earlier than that afternoon.

Somewhat apart, a dozen Yaqui Mansos shared the fire. The roar of the river all but blotted out their sing-song speech. Their slanting eyes were black slits in flat Mongol faces. They were thinking, but no man could have read their thoughts.

Frayne stirred uneasily from his comfortable slouch in the camp chair. Above the voice of the river he could distinguish the mutter of drums. He frowned, then said to the *capatáz* in command of the porters, "Chayoga, what's that, up the canyon?"

The caravan chief was somewhat taller than the six footers who squatted about the fire. Though his expression was beyond interpretation, there was at least a perceptible change, before he smoothly answered, "*Amo,* it is the mutter of the river. Air pockets in caves. The wind, you understand, no?"

"Wind." Frayne drew at his straight-grain pipe, which was lustrous from much handling. "Wind, my eye."

Tum-tumpa-tumpa-tum-tum. . . . Frayne felt rather than heard the sound. His deep set blue eyes twinkled, and the wrinkles left by ancient laughter came back about him, and about his mouth.

"Chayoga, do not bother with lectures about the wind. Who is drumming, and where, and why?"

Santana Chayoga's flat face did not twitch for some seconds. Finally he said, "That is right, *amo.* You have sharp ears. Those are drums. A signal for the mountain Indians to gather for a tribal dance. A harmless custom."

"Sounds like war to me."

Chayoga rose, and stood there with folded arms. His posture amplified the breadth of his shoulder, and accented the flat stomach; corded muscles stood out underneath his thin shirt. "What happens in the hills does not concern us. My cousin's safeguard is good. Do not worry."

Later, the porters and pack train drivers rolled up in their blankets. Some slept on the rocky ledge. Others huddled up with the burros. One man squatted in an angle of the wall, watching while the others slept.

Frayne yawned. The scarcely perceptible flicker of the gasoline mantel lamp was tiring his eyes. He thrust his book into his pack. Instead of taking Shakespeare, or the Meditations of Marcus Aurelius into

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the wilderness, Frayne had an omnibus volume which contained: *Murder at Midnight, Death Strikes at Dawn, The Case of the Cross-Eyed Butler,* and *Daggers of Doorga.* Also, there was a leather-bound manual of mining, prospecting practice, geology, and kindred topics.

THE sentry yelled. Then he twisted in his sheltering crevice, leveled his rifle, and cut loose at something in midstream.

Chayoga lunged from his blankets. He struck like a snake, knocking Frayne flat. "Careful, *amo.* Down! Flat."

A narrow dugout whipped around the river bend. It barely missed the jagged rocks of the mid-channel. A man knelt, plying his paddle. Behind him, another huddled in the pirogue bottom.

Frayne yelled at the sentry, "Stop shooting! The fool shoots at a tired man and a wounded one."

Chayoga cried, "Hold!"

Frayne scrambled to his feet. Standing in the firelight, he waved to the men in the boat. Both were white, and both were wounded. He shouted, "It's all right."

The roar of the current swallowed his words, but the man with the paddle was reassured by the gesture and the white face. He fought the current, slowly beat his way past the whirlpool and the rocks.

"Throw him a rope," Frayne commanded. "He's all in!"

Chayoga and the porters obeyed. Some plunged hip deep into the water to study the pirogue. The man with the paddle stumbled ashore. He was tall and square-rigged. Thorns had criss-crossed his face, mosquitos had dotted it with knobby welts. His chest and bare arms were likewise raked and bitten. His boots were hardly more than scraps.

It was little wonder that Frayne did not for a moment recognize the young man with whom he had exchanged a few good mornings in Guaymas. Don Wayland was scarcely certain of his own identity. He croaked, "We had a tough time, back there in the hills. Give me a hand with my friend in the boat. He's badly cut up."

The Yaquis lifted Herb Keller from the dugout. The photographer muttered, mumbled. His feverish eyes glared from grimy bandages. He began to struggle, to curse the porters. Wayland said, "It's okay, Herb. No more drums. And we're going to eat. Get it? Eat. Grub, you big chump."

"Where's my camera?"

"It's in the boat." Wayland turned to Frayne. "It was, a couple of days ago, till we lost it. Anything to keep him from worrying. Quite an outfit you have here. How about a first-aid kit?"

Frayne gave orders. The porters stretched Keller on a blanket. Another heated water, and one went to prepare food and coffee. Wayland accepted a corn-husk cigarette from Chayoga. The coarse-grained black tobacco was the finest smoke he had ever tasted.

"SO YOU'RE mapping?" This when Frayne had learned the highlights of the crash, of the five-day flight with a wounded comrade; first on foot, then by raft, finally in a pirogue stolen from a mountain village.

Wayland nodded. Food, coffee, a smoke; these made him so comfortable that he was only mildly curious about this gray-haired fellow who was bound for the Yaqui country. After a moment he said, "When I saw the *zopilotes,* I wanted to turn back, and I should have, with that crate."

Frayne chuckled. "Why didn't you?"

"I thought it wasn't logical," Wayland grimaced wryly. "But it was. The birds did know our number was up. You see, the mountain Yaquis had spotted us. They were turning out, hoping to snipe us. The *zopilotes* saw them take the trail, which is a sure sign of tough luck for someone."

Chayoga interposed: "The wounded man rests well, with the new bandages and medicine."

"Dangerous convoy you have here, Frayne," Wayland observed. "How do you keep them in hand?"

"Chayoga has a childish notion about my having done him a favor once. Maybe he just likes me. I don't know. But as

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you were saying, you saw that lake, through the fog, eh?"

"Lucky I did, too. The causeway was pretty rough. Tore most of the landing gear loose. I had been thinking of pancaking her into the tules along the edge of the lake, you know. Maybe I should have."

"So you think it's artificial, do you?" Frayne's query was casual. "Funny you had time to notice that."

Wayland was a little piqued at that. He straightened up. "It doesn't take much time to notice things with open eyes. A dam is one thing, a landslide blocking a ravine is another. An incurved dam, to stand the water head a straight one couldn't. Does that make it simpler for you?"

Frayne rubbed his hands together. "Very. And I didn't mean to rib you, I was just interested. Here, have a bit more whisky. You've been through the mill."

Wayland could not resist the man's disarming amiability. He downed an ounce of smooth Bourbon, and blessed all Kentucky.

"Never knew what a fine thing good whisky is."

"You lost your camera. Very tough. Ten to one, you couldn't find your way back to that half-moon lake."

"Of course I could!" Wayland was ashamed of his irritability, but he could not help it. This old fellow who herded murderous Yaquis had a trick of prodding people. "Do you think I'd forget the trail? Man, I carried poor Herb for miles. I still don't know how I did it. Why they didn't cut us off before we got away from the lake. They could have, you know."

Frayne sucked noisily at his pipe. "Damn funny. A fellow gets . . . um . . . hallucinations at high elevations."

"Hallucinations, nothing. Herb was out of his head; those murdering devils tried to skin him alive. For a war drum. I'd always heard they loved white man's hide for drum heads, but now I believe it. Anyway, they ran when I rushed them. Ran howling, those that could run."

"You hit a few of them."

"Only three. The light was bad. And they're tough."

Frayne nodded. "Odd they didn't double around and pick you off. Why'd you go back to the dam?"

"Because the plane was there. A bit of food. Some water. But they didn't charge. It was as if something about that lake made them keep their distance."

Frayne picked up the detective book, hefted it, as if to borrow a little deductive skill. "Here's another drink, you're shaky. Down it, and you'll sleep better. You need rest."

Wayland did not taste his whisky. "One thing I have to settle. Can you spare me a burro or two, and a Yaqui *tamen* to help me with Herb? So I can get him to Tonichi as quickly as possible?"

"No. I can't."

"LISTEN, man!" Wayland rose, wobbled a little on his feet. "You saw his wounds. I've got to get him to the railway."

"Sorry. I have no animals to spare."

"Then give me two *tamens,* to haul a litter."

Frayne's jaw set. He no longer looked amiable. "No."

"One *tamen,* and I'll help him." His voice rose. "I don't know who you are, I don't know what you're doing here, but you're no better than these murdering Yaquis if you won't give me help."

Frayne said, very quietly, "I'm sorry. But you're working for thieves and swindlers. Dennis and Ledgate, going for the lost Tiopa Mine, using a few clues I uncovered. You have discovered the Lake of the Gods, the landmark Dennis and Ledgate need."

Wayland stared at him in amazement. "How do you know?"

Frayne answered, "They stole notes from my files. I've studied the matter for years. So don't think I'm going to help you to get to Guaymas to tell them the good news. Let's be realistic."

"I work for Dennis and Ledgate, so much a flight. I'll—"

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"No, you'd not shut up. I'll take Keller along. He has as much chance recovering on the trip inland as he'd have carrying on toward the coast. More, in fact, as I can take care of him." He paused and leaned forward, his calm eyes on Wayland. "Guide me to the lake, and I'll divide with you."

Wayland paced up and down the ledge. Keller's muttering troubled him. The sedative Frayne had given needed reinforcement. He wondered if he could carry on in a pirogue, without robbing Keller of his chance of survival. Being blackjacked into selling his employers down the river was just a little too much for Wayland to swallow.

He finally said, "You've got me on a limb. If I dicker with you, I'm a rat. If I don't give Keller every possible chance to get well, I'm still more of a rat. Let's talk it over in the morning. Fair?"

"Over there," Frayne said. "I'll have the boys fix up a bunk. Keller will be comfortable enough in my tent. On my cot."

Wayland wondered, as he squatted there, watching the Yaquis improvise a bunk for him, what Lorela and Frayne had in common. For a moment, he almost had the answer. Then he forgot side issues.

Someone was shooting, down the canyon. Men yelled; not a Yaqui cry, but plain Mexican. Frayne's porters darted about, seizing weapons. The old man deliberately went to pick up a revolver. "I thought I heard a woman scream," he said when Wayland reached his side.

"So did I. Let's go."

Frayne's composure abruptly vanished. "Oh, that damn little idiot!" he groaned. "That damned little idiot!"

Wayland heard and saw, but had no time to guess at Frayne's sudden excitement. He was rounding an angle, plunging into gloom. Ahead, spurts of flame broke the darkness. Hoofs clashed on rock, and irregular bursts of fire told of a running fight.

By now, Wayland was sure that Frayne knew who was involved.

"Hurry," the old man cried, choking. "Hurry!"

CHAPTER V

SCOUNDREL WITH A SASH

LORELA ROMERO'S maid had a face that an Aztec idol would have envied. Tula was solid, rather than fat; and grim, rather than downright ugly. But now, as she divided her attention between the clock and Lorela, her leathery face and bitter eyes showed genuine concern.

Lorela lay face down on her bed. A pillow was wadded around the telephone.

Tula finally laid a gnarled hand on the *rubia's* shoulder. "*Señorita,* soon they expect you at the Silver Tower. Let me help you dress."

"Oh, all right." She sat up, dabbed her eyes. "But I told him to go, and he went. It's my fault he's dead."

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When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

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Lorela went to her dressing table. Tula said, "Also, you told him not to go. Me, I am three times a widow already. Because a man has his work to do. One gets used to it."

Tula's matter of factness was a harsh restorative. The telephone, another irritant, reminded her that the world went on, that she was still part of it. "See what that fool wants!"

Tula answered. "Is Señor Dennis," she announced, and set the instrument on the table. Lorela listened for a moment, and said, "Of course I'll not let you down. I'm dressing now. I'll be there for the first show."

"Before you leave, I want to talk to you."

"I don't want to talk to anyone. No, I'm not angry at you. But please leave me alone now."

"Look, baby. This is something important. All right, you feel rotten, but I've got to talk to you."

"You could see me at the Tower. You would, anyway."

"Listen," Dennis said, irritably, "maybe I haven't thought of that already. I want to see you before you get to the Tower."

He was in town. Her hotel was well out on the beach, overlooking the crescent-shaped harbor. If she had been looking out the arched window at sunset, she could have seen the barren headlands of Baja California, far across the gulf. It was silly, coming all that distance from the middle of Guaymas, and she told him so.

Dennis, however, persisted.

"It's about that mine. A few things I told you the other day. I don't want to go over that on the phone."

"Oh. All right."

Lorela was not yet ready for the acacia yellow chiffon Tula had laid out, when the buzzer whirred. She said to her maid, "Oh, let him wait in the sitting room. I'll take my time!"

But it was not Elmer Dennis. A bell hop brought up a letter. It had been at the desk all afternoon. Now that Lorela had answered the phone, interrupted service of all sorts was resumed. Tula eyed the foreign stamp.

Lorela recognized her mother's handwriting. She had no time for a letter, but she skimmed over the pages. . . . *been so worried, not hearing from you . . . first you, then your father . . . if you've not gotten any trace of him, don't you think you'd better come home . . .*

"The only thing she skipped," Lorela was thinking as she thrust the letter into a drawer, "is to warn me against falling in love with these horrible Mexicans."

THEN Tula draped the yellow gown over her head, and there was nothing to do but arrange that copper-red hair. In the midst of this important task, Elmer Dennis arrived.

He eyed the grim-faced Indian woman. Lorela said, "Tula's all right."

"They all chatter. Can't risk it." His jaw set, stubbornly. "Send her out."

Lorela gestured, and Tula left. In a doubly mirrored image, Lorela saw the Indian woman's lips move, cursing. Tula had never liked either of the partners.

The door had scarcely shut behind her, when Dennis said in what he thought was a subdued voice: "About that Tiopa Mine. Don't let on how much I told you."

"Everyone knows about the Tiopa. Must you discuss that?"

"That's not what I mean. I don't want you to say a thing to anybody about what I told you about a competitor of ours. He's a crazy little geezer and if he goes into the mountains, he's sure as the devil going to get himself murdered. Don't you see, I don't want any talk. People will think that we stirred up Yaquis to settle him."

"It would cause talk if anyone knew that the missing man was looking for the same mine that you are—Elmer, please do go now! I understand, and you don't have to explain any more, and I hope *I* don't have to explain. I am almost sick every time I think of poor Don and—please go."

Dennis shrugged and left. He still was

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worried, and his frown made his shaggy brows bristle. But rightly enough, he reasoned that Lorela was entirely too unstrung to quote any of his indiscreet confidences to anyone. Thinking of her reactions to Wayland's crackup, he said to himself, as he crossed the lobby, "Here I got her a raise and made her *prima donna* and she was stringing me along for a sap."

"Que tal, señor?" He hailed the man who sat in a dimly lighted alcove of the lobby, but did not pause to chat.

The man was Uriel Ybarra. Though he grunted an answer, his glance never wavered from his corner. He could watch the desk and also, the elevator from which Elmer Dennis stepped. Ybarra was a retired pearl diver: than which there is nothing tougher in all Mexico, unless it be a Yaqui Indian.

He wore a dinner jacket and a red silk sash: a dressy touch that did not offset his scarred and rugged face. When a bell hop approached him from the rear, Ybarra's broad bulk shifted with a cattish motion that made the boy recoil. But he recovered and tiptoed forward to whisper into an ear that had lost a sizeable piece.

" *'Sta 'ueno,"* he said, and gave the boy a *toston.* Then he went from the lobby, warily but effortlessly, like a prowling tom cat.

TULA was helping Lorela arrange her cape when the telephone rang. "I'll take it myself," she said, waving Tula aside. She lifted the handset, listened a moment, and nearly dropped the instrument. "Please say that again—"

Tula saw the abrupt change of expression, the incredulity that widened Lorela's greenish eyes. She came closer, slipped her arm about Lorela's waist. The *rubia* did not notice the supporting gesture. She was trying to find words. Her throat seemed full of them, all fighting for first place.

She gasped, "Who sent you—are you sure—who says so? Thank God!"

She dropped the handset. Tula picked it up for her. Lorela resumed, "The man's wounded—but surely I could talk to him —just a minute. He saw him—he's *sure."*

Then, to Tula: "He's not dead! Quick, give me my bag—I don't care if we are late, I've got to see that Indian!"

"The flying man, he is alive?" Tula was very calm about it. "God has been good to us, *señorita.* I am very happy for you."

She did not sound happy, however. The wary look of a much hunted animal was in her eyes. At the door, she ran back into the room and fumbled in a drawer for a minute. When she rejoined Lorela, Tula was patting her blouse into shape, as if to hide something she had hastily concealed in her bosom. Tula did not like the address to which they were bound.

Lorela was too agitated to pay any attention to this distraction. She scarcely noticed the lights along the waterfront. She sat there, twisting a handkerchief and saying to the driver, "Hurry, hurry!"

The cab was hardly a hundred yards from the outskirts of Guaymas when an ox cart lumbered out of the darkness and blocked the road. The driver booted the brakes. The cab shipped crazily back and fourth, then began to slide with wheels locked.

A man in a high-crowned straw hat and a flowing *serapi* pretended to goad his oxen. Oddly, there was no crossroad at this point. Tula screeched at the driver. Then from all this confusion came order. Two men popped up from the roadside and jerked open the door of the cab.

Behind them was one who wore a white shirt and collar. By the reflection of the headlights from the ox-cart, Lorela saw the gleaming lapels of a dinner jacket, and caught a glimpse of a grinning face, until the two who plunged into the cab blocked her view. One said, "Do not resist, we won't hurt you."

"Get out!" Lorela slapped and clawed.

They laughed. Her cape slipped from her shoulders. In spite of her kicking, she had not a chance. The cab driver sat there, groaning and praying. The man in the dress shirt said, "Gag her and dump her into the cart!"

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None of the group heard the slam of the cab's further door. The chief of the party yelled, but his warning came too late. Tula had rounded the rear, and before anyone could stop her, she went to work with a pair of long-bladed scissors.

Grinding cornmeal by hand makes for solidity. Tula knocked the two men off balance, catching them just as they were poised on the running board. One howled, clutched his side, and ran. The other dropped, clawing at his throat. He made ugly wheezing sounds, and blood showered all over Lorela.

The man in the dinner jacket lunged. "Drop it!" He snatched at Tula's wrist. Her teeth sank into his hand. He slugged her with his fist, but Tula had stood up under many a heavier blow than that one.

Luck helped Tula a little. As she slammed against the cab, she slashed. Uriel Ybarra won another scar, and blood from his forehead blinded him. Tula howled at the driver, "Get moving, or I'll cut your heart out, I'll kill you, you lousy *pelado!*"

She lurched into the cab, kicked someone in the chin, and slammmed the door. Lorela had landed on the floorboards. The driver, recovering his wits, gunned the engine. In reverse, a dozen yards or more; then, bumping over rocks, he came back to the road a few yards ahead of the reorganized attackers. He was headed for the hotel.

Lorela asked, "Tula, how did you know?"

"That voice on the phone. I heard it when I came to steady you. Uriel Ybarra, the worst throat-cutter in Guaymas. You see, it was a trick, telling you that the flying man was safe. So I took scissors. I knew you would not listen.

"What is more, *señorita,*" Tula concluded, "I think this Dennis is almost as bad as Ybarra. I think he hired him. About this mine. Yes, I was listening; of course I would listen when he orders out the servant who kisses your hands!"

Lorela snapped on the dome light, then hastily turned it off, when she saw the stains on her gown. "I was wondering how you ever routed three men with a pair of scissors, but it's all clear, very clear."

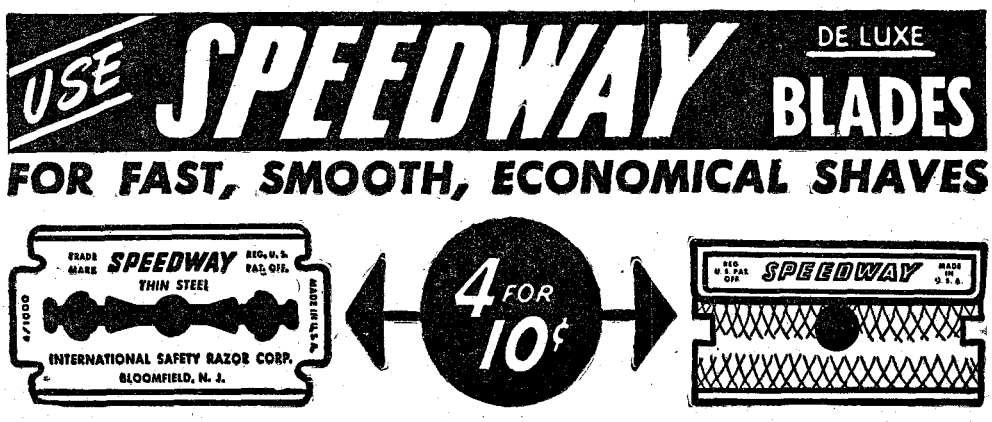
"I did my best, *señorita.* That pig never thought we'd resist, never suspected I had a surprise, and if this good driver had not worked fast, they'd have taken us in spite of all the saints. Just the surprise."

Once in her rooms, Lorela saw that everything had been turned inside out. Her mother's letter was gone. Her identity was completely exposed. She had two moves; one was to get out of Mexico. The other, she explained to Tula.

"Tonight, we have to get up the Rio Yaqui. To join my father. They tried to kidnap me so he would come back."

And in a few minutes, a hired car was taking Lorela Frayne into the foothills, toward Tonichi, whence her father, Gilbert Frayne, had started in his secret march into Yaqui Land.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK



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She grabbed the old devil's whiskers and got her hatpin into firin' position

Meet Mrs. Wildcat

She's the Queen of the Pink Kitten Bar, a lone widow woman with no strong man to protect her. And when you see her in action you'll realize that the strong man would just be excess baggage. Armed with her trusty hatpin she can down ten bandits and whip her weight in horse-thieves

By TOM CURRY
Author of "Bushmaster," "Cathedral of the Giants," etc.

WE HAD a pretty good crowd that night in the Pink Kitten, and Mrs. Ware told me to watch the bar while she went to keep an eye on a poker game in back.

Well, in stomps Sorreltop Harper, who owns the Chicken Wing Ranch, he is also the proud possessor of a chip on his shoulder and a gun on his hip, both of which appear to be aimed at the stranger near the front. Harper ups to the gent and snarls, "Horse-thief!" which is a fighting word anywhere in Texas.

Sorreltop was full of the rotgut whiskey that the Mex down the plaza sells, and he was about as peaceful-minded then as a bronc with a burr in its hide. I eased along the bar, reaching for my sandbag; and out of the corner of my eye I saw Mrs. Ware hop up and start over, too.

The stranger spins around and Harper takes it as an excuse to whip out two colts, aiming one at the stranger and the other at me, and I stop reaching for the sand-

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bag, feeling that a bullet in the brisket is not going to be an improvement to my disposition.

At this point in the festivities Mrs. Ware has taken a stand just behind Sorreltop. She rams her six-shooter into Harper's back ribs. "Drop 'em and reach, Sorreltop!" says she.

Well, nobody but me knows she carries dummy bullets in the gun, as she is afraid it might go off, and she would never shoot anybody. When she wants to damage a man she jabs him with a long hatpin she totes.

Sorreltop is not made particularly happy by this turn in affairs, and he lets his gun fall. "You know I'm not running any shooting gallery in this place," says Mrs. Ware. "Besides there's ladies present."

"Meanin' who?" inquires Sorreltop and my fingers closed again on the sandbag at the insult to the woman I love.

Yes, I have loved Mrs. Ware ever since she come to Pecosville and opened the Pink Kitten Bar and Chowhouse. She had been widowed early by a hanging jury in Kansas; and in my opinion she is practically a goddess. She ain't exactly beautiful, havin' too much in the way of jaw to remind anybody of Lillian Russell, and bein' maybe a little on the hefty side. But then I ain't no Apollo Bellevue myself, and she has got a way of usin' that hatpin that I admire and revere. She is a good, strong woman with a will of her own and a tongue that can sear a man's hide until he curls around the edges—and a fightin' spirit that warms a man's heart.

"Huh," comes back Sorreltop, scowling, "you're mighty pertic'lar, Mrs. Ware, for a body who ain't what you call exactly solvent!"

He was referring to the sad fact that Mrs. Ware had borrowed eight thousand dollars to fix up the Pink Kitten, and to the even sadder fact that it was this same redheaded weasel who held her notes.

SORRELTOP is the sloppiest hombre I ever seen, having a face like a blushing dobie brick trimmed with scarlet feathers and a nature like a weasel's. He has worn the same rig ever since I rode for him fifteen years back before that hammer-headed bronc fell on me. So the aura around him is nothing like heliotrope, and a bath would most likely cause him to die. Far as I know he chews tobacco in his sleep, which is habit the boss don't allow her employees. She has a good many of these ideas such as changing your shirt every week and parting your hair in the middle though I haven't enough to be finicky.

"You'll get your money, Harper," replied the Boss icily, "any time you want it." She was mad too, her temper being none too long.

"So," growls Sorreltop, "you won't let a man indulge in harmless leetle foxpaws like cursin,' chewing and drawin' a gun. But it's all right with you if he can't tell whose horse is which."

"You never open that trap of yours," remarks Mrs. Ware, "'cept to say something mean. If you're making any more sense than usual, you better make your meaning clear."

Sorreltop Harper changed to an oily drawl. "My good intentions has agin betrayed me, madam. I come to rid you of skunk and you gun me from the rear. I will say no more. Ask that moon-faced waitress of yours, the one they call Angelica."

Mrs. Ware leaps to the girl's defense with the full flower of her powers of oratory. Quite a bunch grouped around; we forgot the young stranger and when I looked again he had slipped off.

Sorreltop grabs a quart bottle and in one jump of his big Adam's apple lowers the whiskey level by three fingers. He was fighting riled and says, "If you wasn't a female I'd show you. Why, you've made sissies of the hull population west of the Pecos. But not me, I'm a man and I'll stay one. *Ee*-magine pink curtains in a saloon and flowers, it ain't right."

"Business being fine, thanks," says Mrs. Ware, icy.

It was true. The Pink Kitten does a

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roaring trade. Outside is a fancy sign with a pink cat on it and another by the door ordering you to *Wipe Your Boots, Boys!* I must say it's the most ladylike saloon I ever seen. But the crowd puts up with the trimmings and wipes their boots and eat with forks so Mrs. Ware will let 'em in; you can't get such cooking and liquor anywhere in Texas.

We have a mighty high mortality rate in waitresses being as the Boss picks 'em youthful and easy to look at, another reason why men ride two hundred miles to sample the home-cooking. Seems no sooner do we break a girl in than some waddy totes her to the altar, but Mrs. Ware knows that's bound to happen. Besides although I personally have never been able to arouse it, there is a deeply romantic side to Mrs. Ware's nature.

It so happened that this Angelica Parry was the Boss's cousin, and Harper saying the dark and handsome stranger was a horse-thief was tough for her to swallow. I can see by the look in her eye that she's tabling the accusation for future reference.

"S'pose," says Mrs. Ware, "you take that temper of yours and escort it outside, Sorreltop? I've had enough of your lip for one night, and I am not a patient woman. Besides, this place needs an airin'."

If Sorreltop was mad and mean before, that remark just about drove him crazy. I grabbed for my sandbag and at the same time he grabbed the whiskey bottle and hurled it at our mirror, which has little cupids painted around the edge. There was a big crash and glass flew around in considerable profusion.

Well, that done it. The Boss gave a cry as if she had just seen her only baby smashed in the head. She dropped the six-shooter and drew out that blue-steel hatpin with a twelve-inch barb. And went to it. The Boss has a husky arm and a wicked eye, and one jab set Sorreltop Harper screeching as though all the fiends of hell was after him. He jumped two feet off the floor and she caught him again on the way down. This was enough for Sorreltop, and he dashed madly off in all directions until more by luck than brains he finds the door and stumbled out into the friendly night. He leaped up into his saddle and spurred out of sight with one hand under him to ease the pain of his wounds.

THE ruckus fetched Sheriff Tad Kingsley from the jail across the plaza. The sheriff takes his meals with us and I used to be jealous of him till I found that Mrs. Ware had refused to marry him more times than she had me. "Men are necessary evils across the Pecos," she remarks, "but I'll not hitch up with another gun-toter." It had been a little shootin' fray that had introduced her late lamented to the end of a rope.

"What's wrong, Mrs. Ware?" pants Kingsley. He is a great big hombre with a black mustache and gray eyes; a handy fighting man though I never thought his brains could match his brawn.

"Nothing," snaps the Boss, pulling her temper together and coming back inside. "Just a little accident."

Things quieted down and Mrs. Ware stood at the bar, having a drink with Kingsley, when the door slams in and Sorreltop Harper sticks in his ugly face.

"I want my money by Saturday, Mrs. Ware," he bawls, and hastily jumped back out and rode home.

"Eight thousand," I muttered.

She had spared no expense to fix up the Pink Kitten, and I wondered if she had earned enough in the past six months to pay Sorreltop's note.

It was around ten P. M. when I finally cornered the Boss.

"I got a couple of hundred dollars saved up, Boss," I told her.

She patted my hand and I could have neighed for joy when she says, "Thanks, Slim. That red-head don't scare me. I got most of that eight thousand salted away in my bureau drawer and with the Saturday take I'll pay Sorreltop his money and a slap in the face for interest."

"Then why look so worried?"

"It's Angelica," she tells me in a low voice. "I've been so busy, I never noticed.

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But that girl's in love. She didn't do anything but peck at her food and now she's sprucin' up to go out."

"And so?"

"And so you have no brains," she snaps, because I was so slow to savvy. "Don't you see she's goin' to meet that dark-and-handsome rascal Sorreltop tried to tangle with?"

"What of it?" I asked.

"Why, Harper would hardly come in here and say he was a horse-thief if there wasn't something to it. Now listen, you go saddle two horses and keep 'em out back. I'll meet you in twenty minutes and we'll trail her. I got to reach the bottom of this."

Sure enough, Angelica sneaks out when she thinks nobody's looking and borrowing a saddled horse, rides north out of town into the chaparral, Mrs. Ware and me following at a distance. This Angelica is young and pretty, with big dark eyes and red lips; I could see how a man might bay the moon over her curls and figger, though she is too thin for my taste, not comparing with the Boss in size, brains or spunk. Mrs. Ware looks a first-class horse handler, no cowhand nor no bronc would dare get gay with her. She held the reins in one strong hand, taking the bumps like a master.

Out in the monlit bush Angelica meets up with that handsome young stranger we had spotted in the Pink Kitten, and he lifts her down, and kisses her as if he means it.

They left their horses and strolled off, arm around each other.

"This ain't no idle flirtation, Slim," whispers Mrs. Ware. "And if I ain't mighty careful, we'll drive her to run off with him. She's in love with that horse-thief and he'll ruin her life. I got to save that child from herself."

"Shall I gun him?" I asks.

She gives me a long patient look. "Let me handle this, Slim. This is a woman's business. You just ooze around in front and keep him occupied."

I crept through the chaparral and when I was near, I made a noise with my boot in the leaves, and this galoot jumps like a startled wolf and yanks his pistol.

I shrugged. "Put up the cannon, friend. I got my fingers crossed."

Angelica let out a little scream and run up. "Oh, Frank, it's just Slim Boswell, our bartender. Slim, meet Frank—uh, Frank—uh—"

"Howdy, Frankuh," I said. "Angelica, it's time you were home, ain't it?"

Well, there we were. I didn't know exactly what the Boss was up to, but I had my orders. Keep him occupied. So I began to tell him the story of Dismal Joe and the Indians. This is a story that's got absolutely no point to it, but it's longer than the reach of coincidence. I can see the two kids ain't exactly hanging on my every word and that there are three or four places they would rather have me be, but I go on until I figure the Boss had had time to go through his saddlebags.Then I excused myself and sashayed.

MRS. WARE joined me and I seen the set of her face in the bright moonlight. When we were out of their way she orders "Strike a light, Slim, and let's have a look at this!"

It was a *Wanted for Murder* circular from north Texas country, and the picture of the killer was Angelica's Frank. So was the description, fitting him to a T. "Frank Durban!" I cried. "Why, he must be a son of Old Man Durban, wust horse-thief in the Southwest."

"I reckon so," glooms the Boss. "Look. Five hundred reward by the country and the same by the Bar. 3. That's the biggest spread in the Panhandle and they'll come up with him sooner or later and stretch his craw. Now you beat it right over and fetch Tad Kingsley to my rooms but don't tell him anything."

"What'll you do, Boss?" I ask curiously. "Have Tad throw him into the calaboose?"

She gives me a look. "That would be the very worst thing. Make a hero out of him, and she'll stick for life. Hang him

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and you'll bust her heart. But if he runs out on her—well, maybe she'd get over him."

Kingsley, the big lovesick fool, was glad to come with me to see Missus Ware. She had put on a pretty dress and even doused herself with that sweet-smellin' lilac water that she uses on special occasions. She pours Tad a drink with her own hands and says, "You ever hear tell of a horse-thief named Durban?"

"Did I ever?" cried Kingsley. "Why shore, ma'am! Old Man Durban is called King of the Horse-thieves! Him and his gang 've run off more cayuses than Quantrill done in the Civil War. He's got two sons who're the same kind of rapscallions, the older one's Billy and the younger is called Frank. That gang's wanted in a dozen counties. I had a wire from the Panhandle claimin' the Durbans run off three thousand head last month."

"I savvy." After a minute the Boss asks, "Any idea where this Durban might be holed up, Tad?"

"If I knowed that," says the sheriff, "I'd be a sight richer pronto, ma'am, and then mebbe you'd 'low me to ask you—"

"Thanks, Tad," she horns in and shoos him off.

"Yes, Slim," Mrs. Ware tells me when Kingsley has gone, "I act now. I want you to find out for me where Old Man Durban is hidin'."

Me not bein' a lawman and full-acquainted with the country, that wasn't as hard as it sounded. That night I headed for tall timber and in the morning hunted out a couple shady hombres I'd done favors for in the past. And late the next afternoon I was back at the Pink Kitten, reporting.

"They say Old Man Durban's in the Comanche Hills, not so far from here, ma'am. Why don't you let me take a piece of horse-flesh no fancier could resist and ride through here, so Durban'll be shore to contact me. You want to write him a note?"

"Not on your life!" She jumps up, grabbed her gunbelt and throwed the Colt with the fake bullets into the holster. "Saddle two broncs," she snaps. "I'll see Old Man Durban myself."

"No, you won't," I cried. "I won't let you—"

But she stopped me with a look. I am fond of the Boss, but when she's made up her mind, I'd sooner try to tackle a locomotive.

"Let's ride, Slim," she orders. "I'm on the warpath."

WE HEADED west and kept going, and along about dawn, up in the heavy-wooded, wild Comanche Hills, I was busting trail ahead. Mrs. Ware looked fresh as a daisy and not at all worried.

The end come quicker than I expected; I shoved my cayuse through a narrow deer trail, rounding a corner where the mesquite was thick as a brick wall, and two men jumped out on me, covering me with guns.

"Howdy, Beanpole," cries a youngster with a new beard and steely eyes under a black sombrero. "Where you haidin' this lovely mornin'?"

The other was older and not so mouthy; he was more the man-of-action type. He yanked me out of my saddle and, throwing me to the ground, kicked me in the stomach. I accepted this in the spirit in which it was intended, one of innocent homicide.

"Stand him up—which end is which?" the young one says when I tried to fight back. "Say, that's a handsome mustang he used to own."

Just then the Boss rounds the turn and seeing me in this unhappy fix, she yells angrily, "Turn him loose or I'll taint the air with your insides!"

They were right stunned to see her and just stared into the Boss's useless gun. I've seen strong men tremble when she looks at them like that, but the fresh one grins and says, "Why, ma'am, it's a pleasure! You're somethin' of an armful and you ain't the chick you used to be but you're the purtiest sight I've seen since I left Amarillo!"

"With a posse snappin 'at your heels,"

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Mrs. Ware adds coldly. "You're Old Man Durban's imps, ain't you?"

"We ain't sayin' we are and we ain't sayin' we ain't," the squat, older one snarls, showing an unfriendly and disrespectful nature.

"I won't bother with you," the Boss says plainly. "Take me to your old man, and quick!"

I was wonderin' if this would be the moment when one of them would decide to call the bluff of that wooden-bullet gun, but from the grim look on her face, you'd have thought that shootin' down young hellions before breakfast was her favorite diversion. They must have though so too. They led us up through a shadowy barranca out of which run a little stream of clear water, the young one first, Mrs. Ware next, and the stocky one poking his rifle barrel into my back ribs. I hoped he was walking very careful back there.

I heard a horse neigh and, turning sideways, I seen a big woods' corral full of mustangs, with several riders on guard. The hombre behind me dug me hard, ordering, "Eyes front, Slim."

Past the big corral in the woods, jammed with stolen horses, stood the outlaw camp. Most of 'em were asleep, there were a couple of dozen in sight, rolled in blankets, sleeping on their guns. And out strides an old rascal who was one of the least amiable galoots I ever looked at. This devil stood over six feet and was heavy through the middle; he had an untidy whitish beard and purple lips, shoebutton eyes and a long, sharp snout. His clothes looked like they were slept in, constant. He looked like something the Almighty had thought up to frighten sinners with.

"Well, consarn my hide," says he as he takes in Mrs. Ware. And reaches out a dirty paw to chuck her under the chin. She gives him a good kick in the shins, and he raises his hand to slap her.

That made me mad and I started for him but his men yanked me back, threw me down and stepped on me. For a long time, I took no further part in the conversation.

"Are you Old Man Durban, the horse-thief?" asks Mrs. Ware, pleasant-like as if she was asking was he Mr. Krausmeyer, the plumber.

"Er, yes'm," says Old Man Durban, a little stunned. "To what do I owe the pleasure of yore visit?"

"I've come in behalf of a young lady cousin of mine," Mrs. Ware tells him coldly. "She's a hash-slinger in my Pecosville restaurant and hasn't had any more sense than to fall in love with your son Frank."

The old horse-thief's face lit up. "So that's where that young rapscallion's bin hidin' the past month," he yelped. "He drapped outa sight and I was afeared the Law had him. He's fallen in love agin, has he?"

"Yes, and I want you to fetch him away from her. Seeing you, I know my worst fears was only the beginning of the facts."

Old Man Durban swallows that and says: "I'll shore do that, ma'am. The younkers nowadays ain't what they used to be. And I'm obleeged to you for comin' up here to warn me so's I can save my son from that designin' woman."

"What you mean, you walkin' barrel of criminal intentions?" snaps Mrs. Ware. "I wouldn't have Angelica marry him if he was the next to the last man on earth and you was the last."

That got him. He drawed himself up and says, " 'Scuse me, ma'am, but I wouldn't allow my son marry no waitress. Why, the Durbans bin stealin' horses since my grandpappy rode for Quantrill in the Civil War! That female you mention would only get Frank caught or talk him outa his perfession."

The outlaws were sitting up and listening and we were outnumbered about sixty to one but the Boss didn't give that a thought.

They went at it hammer-and-tongs, trying to think up new names to call each other, and the bandits stared with mouths open. It ended up with the Boss drawing her favorite weapon, that long hatpin with the bead on top, and sticking Old Man

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Durban as he turned to run for it. I held my breath, expecting to be shot down, but Durban made the chaparral a yard ahead of her and she paused, out of breath.

"See kin you calm her down, Skinny," orders my guard, " 'fore she busts up our camp."

"Grab her and take away her fang," bellowed Old Man Durban, but the Boss glared around, making jabbing motions with the hatpin, so none of the outlaws dared touch her.

"After all, ma'am," I called, "Durban and you're agreed on the main point, which is that Frank shouldn't marry Angelica!"

I was afeared they might start gunning us; but Mrs. Ware saw my argyment was right and cooled off some; it ended up with the Boss and me riding down out of the hills, Old Man Durban and six of his picked horse-thieves coming behind.

WE HIT Pecosville round supper time and according to agreement, Old Man Durban was lying out in the chaparral, watching for our signal which would be given when Angelica starts out to meet Frank. Mrs. Ware didn't want her to savvy she had anything to do with his coming disappearance.

Mrs. Ware and me had a bite to eat and then she lay down while I kept an eye on that Angelica, wore out as I was. Sure enough, about ten o'clock Angelica slips out, heading to meet Frank Durban. I had horses saddled and hid in the barn, and hustled over to the Boss's place. She was napping but woke up quick and out we went, trailing Angelica into the chaparral. Frank meets her and I ride back to signal Old Man Durban with a lantern.

He was slow answering but after while up he comes, with three of his men, and I lead 'em back careful to the spot where the Boss was waiting.

For near an hour the six of us waited while Angelica and Frank made the best of the moonlight and then she said goodnight and rode off for the Pink Kitten. "He's all yores, Durban," the Boss whispers to the old horse-thief. "Be shore you drill a hole in the board you spank him with; he's made a nuisance of himself in these parts."

"Huh," grunted Old Man Durban, "go take him, boys, make it quiet and don't hurt him much."

Durban stuck by us and we watched his three boys do a mighty slick job. They jumped Frank, who was busy looking after Angelica, and had no idea he was being stalked; he hardly got a chance to curse, much less draw a gun. They grabbed his arms and legs and throwed a burlap sack over his head so his yells were muffled. Winding a lariat round and round him, they toted him back and slung him over the saddle of a waiting horse, starting west for the Comanche Hills.

"That was nice work," Mrs. Ware compliments Old Man Durban. "You take that son of yores away and you keep him away, savvy? The only reason I didn't turn him over to the Law is I wanted to save my girl. *Adios* and I hope we never meet again—" She broke off with a gasp. "Why, you bewhiskered old carp! Put up that hogleg!"

For Old Man Durban had us pinned with his .45 Frontier Model Colt revolver, his beady eyes glowing in the moonlight. "Keep still," he growls. "I might not shoot you, lady, but I'll kill this stringbean if you go for me."

The Boss described his ancestry in some detail, and I kept waiting for the slug I was sure I'd get, but after a while she simmered down. She couldn't figure the play any more than I could. Durban kept us under the gun for half an hour; then he began to back off, and, finding his horse, hit the saddle and galloped after his men.

"What's the meanin' of that?" I wonder aloud. "We was helpin' him."

Mrs. Ware's face was sour; she got aboard her horse and started back to the Pink Kitten, me at her bronc's heels.

We found the saloon in an uproar, Sheriff Kingsley inside asking questions.

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"Boss, Boss," cries one of my helpers, "a couple of masked outlaws done held us up, took fifty-two dollars and six bottles of our best whisky!"

"I wasn't here, ma'am," Kingsley says.

"I thought so," cries Mrs. Ware, face flaming. "That old muskrat held us to give his men time—" She broke off and run off toward her rooms, me after her.

WE COULD see what had happened, looking through into her bedroom at the northeast corner. Her bureau drawers were open, and stuff throwed all over the floor. With two jumps the Boss was over there, feeling in the bottom drawer. They'd even spilled the Boss's bottle of lilac water; everything was soaked with it.

"Gone!" bellows Mrs. Ware, leaping up. "They got every last nickel. Now I can't pay Sorreltop Harper!"

"How much you lose?" I gasped.

"Seventy-six hundred dollars."

I says: "Them three missin' bandits come here; two held the bar while the third clumb in the winder and stole yore hard-earned cash. Durban kept us under the gun to give 'em a chanct to escape."

Sheriff Kingsley slid up behind me and growls, taking me by the shoulder, "What makes you so shore it was Durban done this, Slim?"

"Let him be," snapped Mrs. Ware, trying to pull herself together. "Talk to me."

Kingsley blinked. "Well, it's sort of a coincerdence, Durban bein' mentioned. Not long ago a young range detective hired by the Bar 3 in the Panhandle come down here huntin' Old Man Durban and his gang. He'd captured one of 'em near Amarillo and kept it mighty quiet. He figgered there was a connection 'tween the Durbans and someone in these parts, so he had some fake circ'lars printed up with his pitcher and description on 'em and come down here, posin' as Frank Durban with the hope he might work in at this end."

The Boss turned pale and sat down hard. For a minute I thought she was going to strangle, but her fighting spirit pulled her through, and she got out some words.

"What—what's this young detective galoot look like?"

"He's a lean, wide-shouldered, black-maned young devil," replies the sheriff and I felt sick all over. "He wasn't tellin' anybuddy his real name, 'cept me; I thought he was loco when he claimed Durban had a depot for stolen stock near here, but from what Slim says, mebbe he was right."

Mrs. Ware was fighting to get hold of herself; she managed to fetch up a little of her spunk as she snaps, "Why in tarnation didn't you tell me all this when I asked you 'bout the Durbans, Tad?"

The sheriff shrugged. "For one thing you rushed me out so fast I didn't have no chanct, and for another, this detective fella asked me to keep it quiet. I did see him sparkin' one of yore waitresses, Angelica her name is, but he didn't even tell her who he is—"

"Tad," the Boss orders, getting herself in hand, "you go right out and hustle together the biggest posse you can and have it ready inside half an hour. Slim, go saddle two fresh horses and don't forget yore gun."

There was a bunch of the boys in the saloon and when they heard the Mrs. was going gunning for Old Man Durban and his gang, they were enthusiastic.

The Boss rode up front with Kingsley and me and I heard her mutter, "I hope they ain't killed that boy yet!"

THE bandits had a long start on us; but for some reason or other Old Man Durban hadn't expected pursuit so quick, if at all. We rushed the trail guards at dawn, shootin' 'em into the chaparral, and galloped hell-for-leather into Durban's camp. As I passed the woods corral I noted that the mustangs were gone. Many of the outlaws were asleep; they jumped up and begun fighting as Kingsley and his boys charged.

Colts and rifles snapped fast and furious as we mixed it up; a couple of our friends took lead but half a dozen outlaws

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were down, and I tried to stay close to Mrs. Ware who was in the thick of it, jabbing with her long hatpin, working over to Old Man Durban.

He let one go at me that cut a groove in my left arm and stung me so I nearly fell off my cayuse; Mrs. Ware reached him from the flank and rammed the hatpin into his cheek so he bowled back, screaming with pain, and then Kingsley and me were on him, stamping him into the dirt. We gripped him and the Boss dismounted, looking down into his ugly face.

"Where's my money and where's that young feller you took off?" she demanded furiously, kicking him in the slats.

"How should I know?" snarls Durban, "you time-wore termagant! I may be a bandit but thank heaven I ain't yore husband and hafta answer yore questions—"

Tad and me started for him but Mrs. Ware beat us to him, hatpin at work, and Old Man Durban yelps, "I can't stand no more of that Injun torture! The detective galoot's tied up back in the rocks; here's yore fifty-two dollars, ma'am, but we drunk the likker."

"Fifty-two!" snarls the Boss. "I want that seven thousand, six hundred yore man stole outa my bureau drawer."

"Seven thousand—why, you're plumb loco," screams Old Man Durban. Then he blinks and gasps, "Why, that red-whiskered, lyin'—" He stopped, shut his trap stubborn-like.

"Search the camp," ordered Mrs. Ware angrily. "I'm not going to budge until I get my money."

We went through the prisoners with a fine-tooth comb but the big cash wasn't there. Up in the rocks, dazed and tied up like a busted arm, we found the range-detective, Frank Phillips his right name was. There were burns on his cheeks. Durban had tried to make him tell where his son Frank was held. That was the only thing that had kept Old Man Durban from killing him.

It didn't take long to locate the trail of the mustangs; it was fresh and led eastward, north of the camp. "Sorreltop Harper!" I heard Mrs. Ware mutter. "I wonder if he's the connection down here?"

Kingsley sent some of his posse back to Pecosville with the prisoners; Phillips, too weak to fight, went along with them, while the rest of us hit that mustang trail east. We found plenty of hoofmarks in soft spots, and near sunset we come on some hidden corrals west of Sorreltop Harper's Chicken Wing Ranch.

"You see what I see, Tad?" asks Mrs. Ware.

I could pick out several cayuses we had glimpsed up at Old Man's Durban's mountain hideout; if you have an eye for horses you can recognize individuals in a bunch. Sorreltop Harper, a gang of his men with him, was mighty busy at branding-fires on the other side, but seen us and they come charging around to stop us.

"What's all this?" bellows Harper, red beard working about his rattrap lips.

Mrs. Ware yells, "I told you before to mind yore talk in front of a lady, Sorreltop Harper! Now you can do your cussin' behind bars."

"What d' you mean?" growls Harper.

"That these are stolen mustangs from the Bar 3, delivered to you by Old Man Durban," the sheriff tells him. "You're under arrest, Harper."

"Huh," sneers Harper. "I got a bill of sale for these cayuses; if they're stole it ain't my fault, and I didn't savvy it."

Sure enough, he yanks out a bill of sale for three thousand horses, Bar 3 brand; Durban had signed a false name, of course, and it was all faked, but Harper was too slick for us.

"You be keerful, Mrs. Priscilla Ware," crows Harper, "how you 'cuse a man of thievery! I'd sue you for insultin' me if you had anything to take, but I reckon—well, don't fergit, the Pink Kitten becomes mine if you don't pay up that eight thousand tomorrer!"

WHEN Mrs. Ware seen Harper snake out of the horse-stealing charge, she went loco. Drawing her hatpin she gave a

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warwhoop and spurred at him, but Harper jerked his bronc aside and kicked a spur into the Boss's cayuse. She wasn't expecting the quick rearing jolt her horse made, and lost her seat, landing plump in the dirt.

This made me really sore and I soared through the air, leaping on Harper from behind, jerking him out of his leather; we lit on the ground, him underneath, and I punished him as we rolled over and over, gouging and punching.

Even as I fit him I realized something was radically wrong, yet it wasn't till Tad Kingsley and a couple of his men pulled us apart that I had time to figger it.

"Hey," I bawled, gasping for wind, "listen, Mrs. Ware, Sorreltop don't smell right!"

"What do you mean, Slim?" she asks.

"Why, he smells of that lilac perfume, yore brand, and strong as heck," I shouted.

"Search him, quick," ordered the Boss.

Harper tried to fight the sheriff off but Tad's a powerful hombre, and he ripped open Sorreltop's dirty shirt. Shore enough, in belts next his grayish hide was Mrs. Ware's money. It smelled to high heaven of lilac perfume, her brand, the bills having lain a long time in her bureau.

"Wriggle out of that, Sorreltop; let's see a bill of sale for my cash!" sneers the Boss. "Nice smellin', Slim!"

Sorreltop couldn't; he was paid off while in jail waiting trial for his thievery, and the Pink Kitten was saved. He had told Old Man Durban to have his men hold up the saloon, which give Harper his chance to sneak in and steal Mrs. Ware's bankroll.

Soon as Frank Phillips got over the beating Old Man Durban had give him, Angelica quit the Pink Kitten to hitch up with him. But, as Mrs. Ware remarks, "When they have it that bad, it's best to get rid of 'em!"

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The two fake astrologers slid out of the shadows, guns leveled

By KURT STEEL

Dead of Night

WHEN NAT THAYER and his second wife BERYL come under the influence of that astrological racketeer, CLEARSE OWEN, the planet Mars takes a baleful ascendant over their lives. MARCIA THAYER, Nat's daughter, is resentful of Owen's hold over her father and stepmother, for she both fears and detests Owen. He persuades Thayer to withhold the inheritance of RICH LANNING, Beryl's nephew, who is engaged to Marcia. Lanning and Thayer quarrel. Marcia intervenes and Thayer takes Owen to his camp in the Adirondacks, where Thayer has established an observatory for the astrologer.

When Thayer leaves the camp, the next morning, he is never seen again. Rich has an appointment with him that day at the camp, but Thayer is not there. He also misses an engagement he had with his partner, PIERRE DAWSON, in Albany later that afternoon, and a process-server, somewhat mysteriously tipped off that Thayer will be on the six o'clock train, does not find him.

Two days later, a phone call, purporting to come from him, instructs Dawson to cash some personal checks and forward the money to General Delivery, Washington. A similar call appoints a meeting with Rich in Washington that same day. But Rich does not find Thayer there.

Marcia becomes alarmed, and she engages HANK HYER to investigate, although Beryl had attempted to hire him four days before for the purpose of discrediting Owen.

HYER proceeds to check on Owen, who is obviously "cop-shy." As a further precaution, Hyer manages to plant his red-haired, freckle-faced assistant, ORSON QUICK, in Owen's employ.

Pierre Dawson's car, which has been stolen, is discovered near the camp, and Rich is ar-

This story began in the Argosy for June 29

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rested, but later released on Dawson's say-so. Marcia receives still a phone call, instructing her to go to Hyer's Greenwich Village apartment. When she gets there, she and Hyer find the body of KARL SANDLUND on the stairs. Sandlund had been the caretaker of the camp until he had been discharged on Owen's suggestion.

Earlier that same evening an unidentified marksman had taken a pot-shot at Dawson through the window of his home with a rifle that turns out to be either the weapon that Dawson kept at the camp, or its twin.

Hank and Marcia decide to go up to the camp and look things over, taking pains to let Owen know of their plan. As Hank expected, Owen is there when they arrive, and so is Beryl Thayer, who informs them that Owen is filling the shack at his observatory with thugs. "He's planning to murder us all," she prophesies dolefully.

Beryl is particularly afraid of Owen because, suddenly deciding that he is a faker, she has told Hyer all she knows about him, including the fact that he has organized a "protection" racket among legitimate astrologers, whom he has forced into line.

Hank goes up to his room and is shaving, when a drink he has taken a few minutes before begins to have a very strange effect on him. He realizes he has been drugged, and suspects that the murderer may be after the watch that Thayer carried the day he disappeared. The State Police had found it on Rich Lanning when they arrested him, and one of the troopers had just turned it over to Hyer.

Hyer takes three groggy steps toward his coat, and knows he isn't going to make it. Beryl, suddenly calm and very purposeful, comes into the room. . . .

CHAPTER XXII

PLANET OF MURDER

THREE hours passed before Henry Hyer, for the second time in the span of a single day, found himself returning to the realm of wakeful affairs under the galling and cheerless direction of a well-wisher. Not one this time, but several. For the first thing he was aware of were voices. Then he realized that he was out of doors in darkness and in rain.

Next, Hyer was able to turn his attention to a more immediate and personal matter—the erratic behavior of his arms and trunk which were afflicted with the most dismaying jerks and convulsions.

This presented a problem of considerable complexity but at length it, too, yielded to careful study and took its place in a total picture whose outlines became momentarily clearer and clearer. His unwilling but helpless torso was apparently a prize coveted by at least three struggling contestants.

Hyer mumbled, "Hey, wh's idea," and for an instant the competition quieted.

But only for an instant, and when it fell upon him again he had recovered sufficiently to recognize at least two of the voices.

Through the gale-driven rain Marcia was shouting, "Let go! Let go of him, if you know what's good for you!"

The riposte to this was a cutting, "And let you folks finish him off? Like hell I will."

Close to his ear, he heard Orson Quick mutter, "Thank God, you're all right, Hank." He felt the boy's hand fumble up along his arm to squeeze it.

Hyer focused his gaze narrowly on Orson Quick. "You've caused me trouble enough," he said to the boy. "Get out of here. When I want you, I'll come for you."

"But, Ha— Listen, Hyer," the boy corrected himself quickly, quelling the eagerness that had betrayed him.

"Get out," Hyer roared.

"Listen here, you." Quick's belligerence had changed tone, become ominous. "I'll get out, but I'll be back. You're not going to pin this on my boss, see. Get that, Hyer?" The rain swallowed him up.

Marcia said anxiously, "Have you walked enough? Are you awake now? We've been walking you ever since you staggered down the hall and told me to."

"Who told you to?"

"You did."

He felt a firm friendly hand under his elbow, heard Rich Lanning say cheerfully, "This way, fellow. The door's easier."

They paced through a warm kitchen spiced with the sharp dry pungence of thyme and basil and summer savory, small and neat as a Dutch interior, into a large, plain, cheerfully untidy room. This was

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the housekeeper's cottage, Hank surmised.

A moment after he had been forced into a comfortable chair at the side of the hearth, the fireplace on which his glazing eyes were fixed was obscured by the massive figure of a kneeling woman. Hyer pondered this, and suddenly observed with the keen irrelevance of a child, "So you were his housekeeper, were you?"

THE woman stiffened as with a quick intake of breath. She rose, towering, massive, turned to face him, the strong regular planes of her face seeming to emerge from a double shadow into light and a disciplined calm. It was a face bespeaking determination, a strong unbending will. The brow was high, nose firmly modelled and broad, mouth wide.

Augusta Warren's eyes rested appraisingly on Hyer. Then she put out her hand. "Glad to meet you, Mister Hyer," she said, her voice a deep controlled rumble. She might have been greeting him on a sunny street corner. "You set still. I'll get you a drink."

In a moment, Augusta came back across the room, her step oddly light and elastic for all her bulk, and handed Hyer his drink. She bent an anxious glance on him as he gulped the whiskey. "How is it?" she rumbled.

Hyer, catching sight of the bottle she held by the neck, choked. Gagging, he jerked forward, wrenched by a violent cough.

Augusta, startled, hammered him between the shoulder blades. "I knew it," she roared. "I knew it."

Hyer's watering eyes fixed again on the bottle. "You—knew—wh-wh-what?" he spluttered.

"Tastes a mite like wood alcohol, don't it?" she said angrily. "The last bottle did, too. This case's jinxed. On top of everything else, somebody had to go and swipe a fifth offa me tonight."

Hyer looked sympathetic. He said, "That's too bad. When did you lose it?"

"There's one less'n there was this afternoon."

"Probably the Indians."

"Ain't none rovin' around. Ain't a soul been here neither."

"Except—"

Staring down at him, her eyes narrowed. She said, "Hum," and absently tilted the bottle to her lips.

Respectfully Hyer watched the fiery yellow liquid gurgle. From the corner of his eye, he saw that Rich had gone over to the window, was talking earnestly in a low voice to Marcia.

"That's right," Augusta said, "except Beryl."

There was a stir at the window. Marcia said, "Someone's coming."

Bright light flashed across the window, went out. An instant later a car door slammed. Smoke backlashed in a flattening gust from the fireplace as the kitchen door was flung open. A voice said, "Hello. Everybody here?"

"Pierre!" Marcia cried. She ran across the room from Rich as Dawson came in.

HIS coat and hat were soggy and wrinkled from the rain. His big ruddy face grew blank and his eyes widened as he saw Hyer crouched in his chair by the fire. He said, "What happened to you?" alarmed.

"Hello, Pierre," Augusta rumbled heartily. "You picked a fine night."

Hyer gave up trying to watch everyone simultaneously. Until his eyes began to track again, this was not feasible. He said, "I had a bottle of doped Scotch."

Rich turned from the window.

Marcia said, "A bottle of what?"

"If you'd had an autopsy done on me," Hyer snapped, "You'd have seen it."

"Someone drugged you?" Rich asked, frowning. *"You?"*

"It wasn't Snow White."

Dawson stared at Hyer. He said, "That's absurd."

Hyer said, "So's my head," testily. "Sit down and I'll tell you all about it."

"Wait a minute," Dawson said. "I'll be right with you."

"There's clean towels on that rack to

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your right," Augusta called after him. "Don't look at the bed. I didn't have a minute to make it up today." She picked up the bottle absently.

Hyer glared at her. "I had a drink," he said slowly, patiently to Marcia. "Somebody had monkeyed with the bottle. I went out like Little Eva." He half-rose from his chair, shuddered, and sank back. He looked at Augusta and his teeth chattered. "Put that down," he snapped as she absently tilted the bottle. "No," he said, turning to Rich, "for the sake of the record, and among friends, just what *did* you do when you left Dawson that night?"

"In detail?"

"That won't hurt."

Rich smiled. "I walked to the subway station at Continental Avenue and Queens Boulevard in Forest Hills, took a train in to Fifth Avenue and Fifty-third street, walked down Fifth Avenue to Forty-fourth street, went over to Grand Central, bought my ticket, and had a meal in the station. An omelette. A very fine omelette.

Dawson, who had come in while Rich was talking, said, "Of course. What else could you have done?"

"MacKinnon," Hyer said, "thinks he stole your car." He squinted at the bottle in his hand. "What time did your train leave?" he asked Rich.

"At eleven-five. I was aboard and in bed by the time the train started. We got to Utica a little after eight the next morning and I had about half an hour there for breakfast before the train left for Big Moose. We arrived at Big Moose precisely on time at ten-forty."

"The down train was waiting on the siding?" Hyer asked.

Rich lighted his pipe carefully. Through drifting smoke he said, "Yes."

"Then you went through it, looking for Mr. Thayer?"

RICH tossed the burnt match into the fireplace. "No," he said frankly, "I didn't. I asked a trainman if anyone had got on there and he said no. I waited until the train pulled out."

"And Mr. Thayer didn't appear?"

"No."

"See anybody else you recognized?"

Rich looked startled. Then, as if ashamed of having been caught offguard, he smiled again. "Yes."

Hyer saw that Augusta and Marcia had both stiffened, noticed how intensely the big woman was staring at Rich.

"Who?" Hyer asked.

"Two men. Karl Sandlund and the cook, Jean. They both got on—separately—just before the train pulled out."

Marcia made a sound and as Rich glanced at her quickly she turned to the window again.

Hyer said casually to Rich, "Let's have a look at that Pullman stub you told us about. The one proving you came up by train and not in Dawson's car."

Rich stood up. "Anything to oblige." He went out of the room.

After a moment Dawson said, "Well, I turned out to be a poor sleuth in one direction. But maybe I made up for it in another."

Hyer's eyebrows rose. He said, "Yes?"

"I lost Beryl," Dawson said. "That's why I drove on up here. Regan said she was headed for the Lake after she gave me the slip. But perhaps these make up for it." Triumph showed in his eyes, and he took from his pocket an envelope.

Hyer, his tongue in his cheek, took the envelope, opened it. Within was a photostat positive of four checks, and four sheets of flimsy, a single signature traced on each. Two of the checks were to *Cash* and issued the Thursday before. The other two were dated six and eight weeks earlier and inscribed to Clearse Owen.

"There they are," Dawson said grimly. "Two sets of identical twins."

Marcia, who had come to look over Hyer's shoulder, gasped.

"The checks I cashed last Thursday," Dawson said, "bear signatures that are tracings from those other two that Nat gave him last March."

"Him?" Augusta rumbled.

Marcia said, "Clearse Owen." Her eyes

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widened. *"Clearse Owen* was the one who drugged you. He was in there. *That's* why you locked the door."

Hyer looked up wildly. "That's why I *what?"*

"Locked the door. Didn't I tell you? You stumbled out, locked the door, and staggered on toward me— What's the matter?"

Hyer was on his feet. "How long ago was that?"

"About three hours. *What's the matter?"* the girl cried.

"Who else saw me lock it?" Hyer demanded hoarsely. The muscles at his temples flexed.

SHE shook her head. "I don't know. Eller started down the corridor from the hall. I yelled at him to keep out of there—you told me to," sharply. "He went back. I must have scared the daylights out of him and Arch from what Pierre says."

Hyer said, striving to sound casual, "Maybe it would be just as well if we went back up there and—"

Rich appeared in the bedroom door. He stood for a moment, regarding them, pipe clenched in the corner of his mouth, his smile ingenuous, disarming. "Wouldn't it be a feather in MacKinnon's cap," he said slowly, "if it turns out that he's right, after all?"

An instant later his smiling defense dropped like a cloak. Oblivious to everything but the girl he faced, he was standing before Marcia, his eyes pleading, haggard.

Augusta was saying loudly, "We'll wait for you in the kitchen," and was herding the two other men out of the room.

Five minutes passed before Marcia joined them. Hyer and Dawson, at the detective's nervous urging, had said good night to Augusta and gone out to wait in Dawson's car.

For a moment Hyer sat biting his lips. Then with a shrug he said lightly, "So the watch problem's cleared up anyway."

Dawson said, "Watch?"

Hyer described how MacKinnon had found in Rich Lanning's pocket Nathan Thayer's watch, which, it developed, had belonged to Rich's dead mother.

As Hyer finished, Dawson was silent. Then he said, "But you didn't mention it to him tonight?"

Hyer, lighting a cigarette, raised his eyebrows in the glow of the match. "I didn't have to."

"Why not?"

"Didn't you get it?"

"No." After a moment, Dawson said, "Get what?"

"How Rich happened to have the watch."

There was another pause. Dawson said, "Maybe I'm being obtuse. Well, what else did you find out?"

"Mr. Thayer did get to New York Tuesday night after he was supposed to meet you in Albany."

"What?"

"He was killed in New York that night," Hyer said quietly.

"What?"

Hyer said, "Think it over."

Dawson blew out his breath sharply. "Well, now that we've got the checks, we can at least go ahead on that."

Hyer said, "No. Not until it looks as if he's about to make a break for it."

"But what are you waiting for?"

"I'm waiting," Hyer said, "for Nat Thayer's body to turn up."

Marcia appeared in the kitchen door, said something to Augusta, and then ran toward them.

"We can't pin it down," Hyer added rapidly, "until we know where Thayer was put. Never mind. We'll know—in time."

No one spoke as they rode out to the fork, turned sharply, and came back along the other leg to the Lodge.

When he stood before his bedroom door in the lodge, there was a certain reluctance in the fingers that dragged a key from his pocket where he had unconsciously dropped it three hours before.

Three hours! There moved within him an unease that was like a young fern frond quivering to uncurl.

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He unlocked the door and opened it.

When he switched on the lights, the drawn curtains, the overturned chair on which his coat and vest had hung, were precisely as he had left them when darkness sagged about him. And *because* they were precisely as he had left them, blind animal panic gripped Hyer.

For in a cone of light shed by a table lamp, lay Beryl Hawtrey Harnett Thayer, her head in the centre of a splotch that had stained the rag rug a brutal brown.

CHAPTER XXIII

KEY TO THE HOUSE OF MARS

QUICK, huddled in an armchair ostensibly asleep watched a short, stout, foppishly dressed man approach him. This individual had been introduced to Quick that forenoon, identified as Reilly by name and astronomer by profession. Reilly was followed by the other astronomer, Ferrara, a lath-like figure, his thin frame ridden negligently by a wrinkled blue serge suit. His long face, expressionless eyes, and stringy black hair gave him something the appearance of a dank and dubious Indian.

Quick studied the pair through his eyelashes and came charitably to the conclusion that Indians might make good physicists, at that. Indians, perhaps, but not trap drummers. He looked at Reilly, at the sleekly combed hair, the bright hard china eyes, the round pudgy face with its vacant indelible smile, the natty, double-breasted herringbone sent, the corseted paunch.

Quick, timing his response to Reilly's second "Hey bub," opened his eyes and looked up drowsily. He squinted, yawned, and stretched himself into a semblence of dewy wakefulness.

Reilly's patent leather grin was tolerant. "Taking it easy?"

"Doesn't anybody ever sleep around here?" Quick complained.

"In this rack—business, bub," Reilly said patronizingly, "you have to learn to work at night. That's when they hang out the stars." His pudgy, manicured fingers jabbed a key at the boy. "The boss," he said, "is going to stay up here at the lab tonight with us. He wants you to get his shaving kit from the Lodge. You know where his room is. Well, this key opens the door at the west end of the house. Don't make any more noise than you can help."

Quick took the key. He said, "Wait a minute. There's a gate—"

"Same key works 'em both. When you come back, I'll show you where to turn in."

As he approached the silent Lodge, light sprang up in three curtained windows on the ground floor of the east wing. Just then he heard, faintly, a scream, muted by walls. He stopped, frowned at the lighted windows, murmured, "Very screwy place, very." Then he shrugged, and continued picking his way carefully along the marge of the clearing toward the darkened west wing of the Lodge.

He unlocked the outer door noiselessly, muttered, "Same key opens 'em both. Well, well," and his manner was that of one who makes a minute but pleasing discovery. He paused an instant to orient himself after he had closed the door. There was no sound. At the end of the hallway a dim light burned. Counting doors, he stopped at the third on the right, Owen's, and tried it.

It was locked. His key turned easily.

He entered the room, arrested his first impulse to switch on the lights, struck a match instead, and groped his way toward the bathroom. He was midway in his course when he stopped abruptly, listened, and as the match burned his fingers dropped it and whirled.

In the darkness he heard it now clearly. Someone was moving with scant stealth toward the door. Quick's rush toward the intruder ended in sharp collision with a solid object that could only have been a fist. He sat down abruptly, then tumbled into unnatural slumber.

THE blow had been amazingly well-placed. It argued a timing that was, in its way genius. Unsteadily Quick got

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up, prudently restrained his first vengeful impulse, and stumbled on toward the bathroom.

In the glass, he studied his ...gular freckled face. It was unmarred. The discovery that he could pass a casual inspection heartened him, and his wrathful greenish eyes took on a narrower, speculative cast. Absently he ran his employer's silver-mounted comb through his hair and turned to leave the bathroom. Remembering the toilet kit, he went back and gathered it up.

In the dimly lighted corridor he locked the door behind him and stood for a moment listening, staring up and down at the silent uncommunicative panels. The chance of his lighting by happy accident on Henry Hyer's door was decidedly remote, and the fact that he had shown such an athletic interest in Hyer's fate after the detective had been drugged would scarcely show in a happy light if he were called on now to explain his presence here in the house.

He glanced quickly up and down the corridor and went to another door. The tip of his tongue touched his dry lips. He slipped the key softly into this lock (the fourth) and turned it. The bolt gave easily. Curiosity thoroughly unleashed by now, he tried the key in yet another door —with the same result.

Satisfied, he murmured, "A passkey—to the whole shebang," and grinned.

The grin stiffened. He waited. Some deep center of animal watchfulness twitched again. He whirled.

Marcia Thayer, standing in the entrance to the corridor ten feet away, said, "Well?" The deft triangular lines of her face were taut, uncompromising. Her mouth was a straight line. Her right hand was thrust into the patch pocket of her damp tweed coat, and just at the pocket the coat lifted to fall sharply from the snout of what might, of course, be a ten cent flashlight.

Marcia said, "Come on. This way." Her voice was low, but her eyes were persuasive, and the hand in the coat pocket was quite steady.

Quick said, "What's the matter?"

They heard a car slide to a stop in gravel.

Marcia said, "There's Trooper MacKinnon. He'll be glad to see you. Come on," sharply. "You don't look feeble-minded."

CHAPTER XXIV

QUESTIONS WITHOUT ANSWERS

TROOPER MACKINNON'S inquiry was thorough, workmanlike, incisive—and fruitless. By two o'clock, thirteen people had answered or parried his questions for three hours.

As the clock in one corner of the great hall struck, MacKinnon rubbed his long jaw with a knuckle and scowled at his notes.

"You say you were down at the boathouse from six-thirty to seven, Miss Warren?"

"I said it was about that," Augusta rumbled wearily. "I can't be sure to the minute." Her dark eyes were steady. "It was when I was coming back up to the cottage that I heard Marcia calling me. I run to her and—"

"Yes, yes," MacKinnon broke in, "you found her trying to lift Mr. Hyer from the ground. And the two of you walked him through the rain for two hours—"

"Until that young red-haired thug come up to us and began to make trouble," Augusta broke in.

Quick, sitting between Clearse Owen and the short fat astronomer, looked at her stonily.

"Now, now, officer," Owen said heartily, "if your suspects want to malign each other, that's one thing. But keep them from libeling my men, will you?" His swarthy face, surmounted by jet hair, was flushed. He laid a hand protectingly on Quick's shoulder.

MacKinnon said, "You were in the observatory all the time, were you?"

"I was," Owen answered loudly, with a show of teeth. "I was with my two assistants. We can vouch for each other and for this lad here." Again his white teeth

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flashed and he gave a short laugh. "So sorry," he said.

MacKinnon looked at the two assistants seated on either side of Owen and Quick. His eyes rested on Reilly, the veneered hair, the indelible grin, the rakish herringbone and girdled belly. "You're—"

"An astronomer," Reilly answered quickly.

MacKinnon said, "Oh yes. You—"

"Study the stars, officer. North star, South star—"

"A technician," Owen put in loudly. "Both are technicians. They work, of course, entirely under my direction."

MacKinnon said, "Of course," with elaborate acceptance.

"FARLEY." MacKinnon turned to a wiry booted man with bow legs and a sharp Irish face, standing by the fireplace.

"Yes sir," the booted one said quickly. "If you think I wasn't fixing that downspout like I said—"

"How long have you been caretaker here, Farley?"

"Week today."

"Better come around and get acquainted some time. We like to know caretakers. And you, bud?" looking at Quick again.

"Me," Quick said innocently, "I already told you where I was."

MacKinnon looked at his notes. "Oh yes. At the observatory."

"Sure. I can prove it. I was writing a letter to mama. Let me run up there and I'll get it to show you."

"You weren't writing any letter when I found you," Marcia put in sharply. "What did you do with that key?"

Quick said, "Key?"

"Mac," the girl said desperately, "I tell you he had a passkey, trying the doors in the west wing."

"Sorry, ma'am, you must be mistaken," Quick said politely.

"Anyway," Hyer added, "that was three hours after it happened."

MacKinnon looked at him thoughtfully. Then he turned to a black-browed stripling in breeches and a windbreaker. "You can swear you heard the shot just before seven, Arch?"

The guide nodded. "Eller he—"

"And you heard it, too, Eller?"

The chauffeur's pinched, hermit-like features twitched. He said in a low voice, "I did, sir."

"Just after Miss Thayer went out with Mr. Hyer?"

"Not more than three minutes afterward, sir. I had just come into the hall here to fix the fire after Miss Thayer had warned me to stay away from that door."

MacKinnon said, "All right, all right." He looked at Rich, sprawled in a chair beside the fireplace. "You were *all* day driving up from New York, Mr. Lanning?"

Rich raised his right hand, fingers outstretched. "Five tires, officer. Five. Bearing out the ancient superstition with a vengeance, what?" But his cheerfulness cost him an obvious effort, and immediately his gray eyes were grief shadowed again.

MacKinnon studied his notes again, shuffled them, seemed on the point of another question, and hesitated. He said, "All right, you can go on to bed. But don't anybody leave the place. It wouldn't look nice." He rose, said, "Hyer."

IN a card room off the hall, the trooper closed the door and leaned against it while he absently took tobacco and cigarette papers from his pocket. He said, "Well, what was in your drink, do you think?"

Hyer shrugged. "Something simple, probably. Seconal. Beryl could have had that in the medicine cabinet."

"Then you think she did it?"

"Why did she come in just as I went under?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Because I've got something she wanted."

MacKinnon frowned. "What?"

Hyer took from his pocket the paper bearing Clearse Owen's veritable horoscope

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which Beryl had given him the night before. "This."

MacKinnon's frown hardened. "What under the sun's that?"

Hyer said, "Owen's right name, probably." He folded the paper and put it away. "I've got a research man working on it. It doesn't bear on this, so you can forget about it."

"What do you mean it doesn't bear on this. If you're right—"

"If I'm right," Hyer broke in, "Beryl had the same trouble Karl Sandlund had when he came to New York. Maybe that French cook is suffering from it, too."

"What?"

"A dangerous attack of information."

"About—"

Hyer stared at the trooper a moment and nodded. He said, "Thayer."

MacKinnon, as if suddenly aware that the conversation had taken a detour, said sharply, "Your theories can wait. We've got a perfectly specific case on our hands here. You, Marcia, Miss Warren, Eller, and Lanning—how do we know know Lanning didn't drive in until afterward? All right, granting that you were out cold—"

"And wet." Hyer shivered.

"—how do you know what the rest of them were doing? And why did you lock that door—"

"Take one of those sleepy-time highballs, and see what *you* do," Hyer challenged.

"And who unlocked it to shoot her, and why didn't she scream. You people have got a lot to consider, haven't you?"

Hyer nodded gravely. "The opposition up at the observatory didn't do so badly by themselves, did they?"

"They coördinate better than the rest of you. By the way," MacKinnon added casually, too casually, "I hear you were called in by Mrs. Thayer—"

"No. Marcia."

"Wait a minute. I hear you were called in by Mrs. Thayer *before* her husband disappeared."

Hyer said, "Oh, you mean that Monday morning."

"That's what I mean."

"It does look funny, doesn't it?" Hyer asked guilelessly.

"SIT down," MacKinnon said brusquely as Hyer started to rise. "You sound as if you had this thing all worked out."

"I've given you everything I know."

"I suppose you know who killed Mrs. Thayer."

"Maybe I do, maybe I don't."

"And Sandlund?"

Hyer said, "Maybe."

"Then she didn't do it?" MacKinnon challenged sharply.

Hyer said, "We both get paid for this sort of thing, don't we?"

"And you say you know what happened to Mr. Thayer? My God, man, why don't we arrest—"

"That," Hyer said, "is the rub. I *don't* know what happened to Mr. Thayer."

"You said he was dead."

"And in seven years the courts will come to that same conclusion. Seven years is a long time to wait."

"For a fee," ironically.

"For anything." The banter vanished from Hyer's eyes. He rose. "I know who killed her. Maybe you do, too, by this time. I know who killed Sandlund, who got that money in Washington—and right now we'd have about as much chance establishing any one of those before a hostile jury as proving that Marcia kidnaped Charlie Ross. Jury evidence," he said acidly, "has to be foolproof. You could drive a Mack truck through any one of those cases. With what we've got to go on.

"Maybe it hadn't occurred to you, Mr. MacKinnon, that we're up against a killer who probably never got kept after school."

MacKinnon closed one eye and squinted at Hyer with the other. "So you're waiting—"

Hyer broke in calmly.

"I'm waiting until a police photographer can record the present whereabouts of one Nathan Thayer, publisher. Maybe our killer wasn't so smart ten days ago."

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CHAPTER XXV

VISIT TO THE WIZARD

THIRTY minutes later Hyer walked out of the Lodge with MacKinnon and stood for a moment talking to the trooper and two of his colleagues before they drove away.

"Well, there's one thing," Hyer said. "If those alibis of Owen's and his men didn't come out of cans, then I'm—"

"You made that point," MacKinnon broke in irritably.

An infinitesimal warning stirred within Hyer. He said, "See you when you get back in the morning," cheerfully and started toward the veranda.

"Wait a minute."

Hyer stopped, returned to the car, his bland face showing just the proper degree of interest. He said, "What?"

MacKinnon leaned on the wheel, and rubbed his long angular chin. "I've been thinking about Mrs. Thayer's calling you in last week before—"

"Sure. She wanted to get something on Owen." And not until he actually heard the words was Hyer really conscious of their import. That faint warning was now a ringing bell. "Take a tip from me," he said. "Find that cook."

MacKinnon started to speak, checked himself, said angrily, "I'm probably making a big mistake not locking all of you people up. Be sure *you* stick around."

Hyer's mouth was ironical as he retuned to the Lodge. The irony was still there when he sat on his bed and leaned down to untie his shoelaces. He had loosened one knot when he stopped, frowned at the red-coated huntsmen on the wall paper a moment, then rapidly retied the lace. He straightened up, and murmured, "Well—it might work, at that," rose, drew the curtain carefully, poured himself a drink from a flask he had filled at Augusta's, and then, after an appropriate interval, turned out the light. For a time he sat in the dark. Presently he snuffed out his cigarette, rose, and listened. The house was silent.

In the corridor a dim night light glowed. Hyer listened again. To reach the nearest veranda door he had to cross a corner of the vaulted hall. The fires which had been replenished two hours before had now fallen away to coals, but just as Hyer reached the darkened room, flames leaped up against one of the giant backlogs.

Hyer was just turning the knob of the front door when a voice behind him said, "Hello," softly.

MARCIA'S head had appeared over the back of the couch at the far end of the room. She stood up, stretched. "Where are you going?"

"You ought to be in bed."

Hyer came down the room toward her.

Marcia sank back into the deep russet leather couch and looked up at him. "I couldn't sleep. Thanks," as she took a cigarette from his proferred case. "I thought you might be coming out."

Hyer sat down on the couch, held his lighter for her.

She frowned over the flame. Her blue eyes were shadowed, her mouth taut.

Hyer said, "Just before MacKinnon drove off, he brought that up again about hadn't I been called in by Beryl before your father disappeared. He was discreet enough." There was a shade of apprehension in his smile.

"I don't understand," Marcia said sharply.

"It wouldn't be the first time a private dick set himself up a fat fee."

She made an impatient gesture. After a moment she said in a tight voice, "This afternoon, long before we got here, you said something about Rich's pullman stub, about—none of us being likely to see it."

In the silence a log broke with a soft plop.

"We haven't seen it, have we?"

She struck her knee with her fist. "It's like some badly written play. It's so unbelievable you want to laugh. Yet— When Rich came out and said the ticket had disappeared, that it had been taken out of the desk drawer some time since Satur-

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day, I felt—I felt something give." She drew deeply on her cigarette. "So," she said, "you can't trust anybody, can you? I guess that's worth knowing."

Hyer looked at her steadily a moment, and then said:

"As long as you don't include yourself in the list."

She was silent for a time. Then she asked, without looking at him, "Why did you say—just that? Not," she went on at once, "that it makes any difference. None of us has had any real faith in himself for a long time, I guess. Dad got mixed up in this soothsaying rigamarole because the world he was used to went sour.

"Rich," she said quietly, "has always gotten into scrapes because he's never had anything to believe in. Beryl was crazy as a bedbug, and I think she knew it. I think that was what bothered her really. Eller has been on his way to a psychopathic ward ever since his son died. And me—well, I haven't been able to look myself in the mirror for years." She laughed shortly. "I never even had the guts to be a deb. I went to boarding school and did all the correct things—except coming out—and what does it add up to?"

After a moment, Hyer said, "All right, what does it add up to?"

"If I try very hard," she said slowly, "I can think of three people I don't despise. I haven't a friend in the world, and the one thing my expensive education fitted me to do is spend money. When I'm in form, I can give cards and spades to any other spoiled brat at that little avocation.

"I haven't had a serious thought, except getting Rich out of trouble, since I was twelve. If anything that requires a little honest concentration hits too close to me, I turn around and walk away from it. If anything happened to the family bankroll, and I had to make my living, I can think of exactly one job I might hold down. I'd probably do all right at it, but—well, unless you're a lot more gregarious than little Marcia, it's not a very alluring prospect, is it?"

AN INSTANT later she was hunched over, her face hidden in her hands, her shoulders shaking. After a time she quieted, said without raising her head, "It was seeing Beryl that did it, seeing her lying there, and knowing that—" she choked. "I'd never seen a dead person before." Once more a convulsion of grief shook her.

When she looked up, her eyes were dry. "He—*is*—dead?" she whispered, and it was as if some utter faith flickered and died as she waited for Hyer to answer.

Hyer, not trusting himself to meet her eyes, said, "We can't be sure. . . . Look, I want to take a quiet peek at the observatory. Want to come along?"

She drew a quick breath. "All right. Let's go see Owen. Do you think you can open that gate?"

Hyer said, "We'll climb the fence if we can't."

The rain had passed with the fickleness of a summer thunderstorm, and now the night was crystalline and star-hung.

As they struck across soft springy turf, Marcia said, "Have you a gun?"

Hyer said, "Gun?"

"All right."

When they came to the border of the clearing, Hyer, with a gallantry born of prudence, stood aside and let her lead the way along the all but invisible trail that wound through the forest.

They had gone but a short distance when the girl stopped suddenly and Hyer collided with her. She had half turned, and so abrupt was the impact that Hyer's arm flew about her to keep them both from stumbling. Because she was trembling, and because it was not precisely a sacrifice on his part, he let the arm rest where it was for a moment as she pressed against him.

Presently she drew a breath and gave a quick laugh. "Once in a blue moon," she said huskily, "being female pays off. A little tangible masculine sympathy does things for you."

"What's the matter?"

"This place where we're going. It's al-

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ways given me the creeps. As though there were something waiting there, lurking—something thousands of years old and not dead." She shuddered, laughed again. "I'd be a push-over for a real medicine man."

They reached the gate, and for a few moments the silent darkness was disturbed only by the clicks and rustling of his work.

Hyer said brightly, "Well, here we go," opened the gate.

On this side the building was dark. They were almost in the shadow of its bulbous dome, looming dark against the star-clustered sky, when Hyer caught the girl's hand and halted. For an instant he held his breath, ears straining for a repetition of the wisp of sound off to their right.

The shout, however, came from the opposite quarter, and near at hand. There was a second shout, truculent, challenging, followed instantly by a threshing as Orson Quick tripped over Hyer's outstretched foot.

The detective dropped on him, muttering angrily in his ear, "All right, all right, don't spoil it any worse."

CHAPTER XXVI

THE WIZARD AT HOME

A DOOR in the wing of the observatory opened. The tall thin astronomer and the short stout astronomer rushed out, stumbling on toward Hyer and Quick who were staging an impromptu but highly articulate controversy. The tall one led the way with a flashlight. Reilly panted a step behind, his short arms fondling some esoteric astral instrument, though Hyer was unable to distinguish it from a submachine gun.

"This guy and girl," Quick snarled, "were snooping around out here. What'll we do with 'em?"

"Snooping around?" Marcia echoed hotly. "On my land?"

Reilly, recognizing the girl, made a sudden and wholly unsuccessful effort to stuff the machine gun into his hip pocket. His companion, after flicking the flashlight beam over Marcia, lowered it.

For an instant there was silence, silence laced with the shy tendrils of embarrassment.

Reilly thrust the machine gun into the tall one's hands, took the flashlight. This transaction seemed to afford him a measure of relief. His grin easier, he touched his temple, said, "Sorry, Miss Thayer, but the kid's kind of new, and he don't—" He turned angrily on Quick. "Listen, you, if Miss Thayer wants to walk around up here, it's all right, see? She owns the joint, see?"

Quick muttered something.

"We must have got lost," Hyer said.

Reilly's grin widened. "Lost. Oh, yeah. Through a gate."

"Since we're here," Hyer said affably, "suppose we stop in and pay a call on your boss."

"He's asleep."

"Fine. I knew he'd be glad to see us." Taking Marcia by the arm, he waved the thin astronomer out of the way, and moved on toward the observatory.

Reilly said, "Hey!"

Hyer waved his hand above his shoulder. "That's all right. If you boys were going hunting, don't mind us." His hand under Marcia's elbow he guided her on toward the open door. Behind them he could hear a swift murmured conference. Then the startlingly armed convoy swung into their wake.

At the door Hyer stepped to one side, bowed, and handed the girl into the building.

As she passed him, Marcia's blue eyes caught his and in them was a bitter humor.

"Well," Hyer said, following her, "nice homey place, what?"

THE room they entered had few marks of scientific enterprise. It was furnished rather in the manner of a small and exclusive club. Hyer, looking about, let his hopeful glance rest on the three who had filed in after them and were now ranged in front of the door.

Reilly grinned. His lank companion laid the gun in a chair and jerked once at

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each of his coatsleeves. Orson Quick's greenish, freckled glare was perhaps a trifle synthetic.

A voice boomed, "What's going on in there?"

A door across the room flew open and Clearse Owen strode in, knotting the cord of a brilliant gold-and-black mandarin robe. His eyes widened. He said, "Upon my soul, visitors!" and burst into a hearty laugh.

His great black mane was mounded fastidiously as ever, but under the mandarin robe he wore a plaid hunting shirt, brown corduroy trousers and blue bedroom slippers. His glance lighted on the machine gun and his laughter redoubled.

"What a marvelous reception, Marcia, my dear! Come in, come in and let me atone." He checked himself suddenly and his bushy eyebrows rose. "I take it you did come to talk to me?"

"No," Hyer said, "we were practicing to be Eagle Scouts, but we don't do it as well as your red-headed tenderfoot here."

Owen said, "Splendid. But now that you're here, do let me show you our little eyrie. I know you're curious." He laughed.

"Curious," Hyer said, "is only the half of it." He walked over to where the submachine gun lay in the chair and picked it up under Reilly's congealing grin. "All right," he said brightly to Owen.

"You will have your little joke, won't you?" Owen said, and roared with laughter again.

Hyer turned and glared at Quick. "No peeking through keyholes, now."

The boy took a menacing step toward him, fists cocked. "Why, you—"

"I know what you were doing down there at the house tonight," Hyer broke in harshly. "If we want to have a quiet little talk with Mr. Owen, you try looking through the keyhole here and see what happens." He cradled the machine gun and said affably to Owen, "Why don't you teach your help some manners?"

"Dear me. So he let himself get caught, did he? How careless. I will have to take him in hand. Well, are we ready?"

He bowed them through the door from which he had come, and Hyer saw that they were now in the main domed body of the observatory. Far overhead a single bulb burned, naked, inadequate, like a forgotten dropcord in a massive, half-dismantled stage set. The place was chill, silent, its ceiling and shadowy circular walls giving it a peculiar spaciousness that heightened the unreality of that one futile bulb aloft in its webbing of girders.

"Never visited us here, have you, Marcia darling?" Owen said, closing the door behind him.

The girl said, "No," shortly.

BECAUSE of some obscure stress in her voice, Hyer gave her a quick searching glance. But the gloom of the place prevented him from reading her face, and annoyance seized him—annoyance and something less easily named.

Owen chuckled, dropped one arm fraternally over Hyer's shoulders and the other over the girl's, walking them forward across the circular room, chatting amiably.

Hyer, attending less to what the astrologer was saying than to the smoothness of his monologue, was struck by a swift incongruous memory. Once, years before, he had walked, deep in the night, through a deserted wax-works show whose owner's comely assistant had disappeared. The chill of that visit returned to him now and he found himself remembering the torture chambers, the huddled wretches—and the Sleeping Beauty, who had been neither sleeping nor beautiful when the wax was removed by a shaking coroner's assistant.

"Rather well equipped little workshop we have," Owen was saying proudly. "Won't find another like it in the country." His laughter echoed vacantly in the domed room, and he pointed with sweeping gestures to the instruments about them: the telescope itself, its resolving power and up-to-the-minute mechanism, the various cameras, the spectroscope, the Geiger counter, intricate timing and measuring devices which, he assured them, were possessed by only the most modern laboratories.

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While he talked, the silent skeletal frame of the telescope brooded over them like some monster from the fossil past and beyond the circling walls the silent night stretched limitlessly back into the mists of five thousand years of necromancy.

Angrily, Hyer shook his head like a spaniel and fought off the memory of that wax-crusted thing in the shabby distant room.

"And now that you've seen it at last, what do you think of it, little Marcia?" Owen asked curiously.

"I think it's obscene."

"Come, come!"

"It's like fitting up a white sterile operating room to slit chickens and read their entrails," she said passionately.

Owen's laughter all but choked him. "What a marvelous talent for metaphor!" He ushered them out of the barnlike observatory into a small study.

Marcia, her eyes dark with anger, her lips compressed, dropped into a chair. Hyer sat in a low armchair near the door and laid the machine gun on the floor beside him. Owen, himself, leaned against a desk and regarded them humorously. The room contained only the desk, the chairs in which they sat, and a steel filing cabinet.

"When you did Rich Lanning's horoscope," Hyer asked, "did it tell you he was a murderer?"

Owen glanced toward Marcia and then back at Hyer, and his swarthy features smoothed. He said, "I see you have a very naïve conception of my calling, Hyer."

"Luckily a lot of other people do, too."

Owen bridled noticeably.

Marcia stared at the big man leaning against the desk, and her foot tapped the air impatiently. Suddenly she became absorbed in the nervous, flickering play of the fingers of Hyer's hand, as it dangled behind his chair.

Hyer said, "Are you willing to help me?"

"Help you?" Owen threw back his head and laughed. "Can you think of any good reason why I should?"

"No," Hyer admitted, "I can't. Except that I'm willing to do you a favor now."

Marcia, bewildered, frowned from one man to the other.

"Spoken like a politician, Hyer," Owen said admiringly.

"We'll assume," Hyer said blandly, "that you did't know why Rich Lanning went to Washington last Thursday afternoon."

"Assumption granted."

"Or that the money that disappeared Thursday belonged to Lanning—or that Dawson would be smart enough to find the two checks from which you forged the ones you sent to him after calling him and making believe it was Mr. Thayer."

OWEN pushed himself away from the desk, towered over the seated detective. He had flushed a furious red. For the moment he made no pretense at the mask of good humor he had been maintaining. "What checks?" he demanded angrily.

"The ones you forged, cleaning out Rich Lanning's bank account."

"The account Dad set up on your own advice a few days before," Marcia put in hotly. "Don't forget that."

"That's a lie," Owen shouted. "That's a lie and you know it."

At that moment there was a forthright rap at the door and Orson Quick came into the room without waiting for a summons. There was a determined set to the youth's angular jaw. Hostility leaped into his greenish eyes as they swept across Hyer.

"Get out!" Owen roared.

"Listen," Quick said rapidly, "do you know who this guy is?" He jerked his thumb at Hyer. "He's a dick and he's crooked as they come. If I were you, I'd—"

"And if I were *you*," Marcia broke in, "I'd get out of here before—"

"Keep out of this," Quick growled.

Hyer left his chair, took two steps, seized the boy by the arm. "Miss Thayer's a friend of mine," he said levelly. "If you don't apologize to her, I'll haul you out where we won't muss up a rug and take

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you apart to show her what kind of a guy you are."

Quick glared at him. "You and what seventeen—?"

Hyer's hand landed with a smack over the boy's mouth.

"Stop that," Owen bellowed. "Both of you."

The pair halted their scuffling.

The little entr'acte, however, had served to restore Owen's balance. He was still red, but his voice as he addressed Hyer had lost its angry burr. "You do it very well, Hyer, but just what do you think you'll get out of lying to me?"

"I'm not lying."

"Damn it, you can't accuse a man point blank of forgery and expect him to—"

"Look," Hyer broke in, "if you want proof I'll get it for you. Dawson is down at the Lodge. He brought those signatures up from New York to show them to me. Send your red-haired monkey here down and bring him up."

Marcia had risen during the fracas. She was white. Now she came quickly to Hyer. "Can't we wait until morning?" she asked.

"Marcia," Owen said sternly, "when a man has the effrontery to—"

"I'll tell you," Hyer said, "Marcia and I'll go along with the kid here. Dawson might not come for him. We can probably persuade MacKinnon, too, if we can get hold of him. Though it's a little out of his line, forgery."

"To hell with MacKinnon. I want to see those checks."

Hyer said, "Fine. Come on, youngster." He picked up the submachine gun, jerked his head toward the door.

"Who you calling youngster?" Quick asked bitterly.

"That's all right," Hyer soothed. "You can't see him."

"Go on," Owen said impatiently. "I want to have this thing out. I'll be waiting for you."

THE three of them left the building, started down the forest path guided by the beam of Quick's flashlight.

Hyer said, "Nice going, son. I'd like you to meet our new client, Miss Thayer. She doesn't like your looks. She's a smart girl in other ways, too. Miss Thayer, Orson Quick."

Marcia gasped. "*Our* new client? Good Lord! You don't mean you—he—?"

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Thayer."

"But you're working for *Owen*."

"You get your prepositions a little mixed, don't you?" Hyer said, chuckling.

"Do you mean to tell me," she asked, aghast, "that in twenty-four hours you can plant a man right in the heart of Clearse Owen's menage? Just like that?"

"Given the right man," Hyer said with a trace of stifled pride, "you don't need to plant him. You just give him a shove. By the way," he asked the boy, "how did Owen happen to hire you?"

"Hire me?" Quick echoed scornfully. "I sold myself to him."

"You what?"

"I sold myself to him," the boy repeated. "I told him he needed a bodyguard, played up to him—how that guy eats flattery!"

Marcia made a choking sound. "The bellowing Bull of Bashan!"

"Anyway," Quick went on after waiting politely a moment, "he called up Mike Gaynor—you know you'd had Mike make the date for me to have my horoscope—well, Mike gave him the works. You owe Mike something, Hank. He sure can think on his feet."

"That isn't where he usually telephones," Hyer demurred.

"Would you two mind," Marcia asked, "letting me in on this fascinating conversation?"

Quick, with a modesty d'Artagnan might have envied, explained the subterfuge by which he had been introduced into Owen's life. "And," he added, "I did all those things you told me to, back there, Hank. I fixed it up and just had time to get back when he blew his top at you."

"You two," Marcia said, "are priceless." Then, while Quick unlocked the gate, she said, "But what were you doing, wiggling your fingers like that?"

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Hyer chuckled. "Sign language."

"Sign language?"

"You never can tell who might be peeking through a keyhole."

"Oh, so that's why you made so much about peeking through keyholes. But I thought you had to use both hands to talk on your fingers."

Quick held the gate open. "How'd you suppose one-armed deaf mutes got along?" he asked scornfully.

Marcia paused in front of him, regarded him. "Do you know, Orson," she said, "I'd never given that problem a thought. Will you teach me how to do it?"

Quick waggled his flashlight beam on the path ahead of them. He said, "Sure."

CHAPTER XXVII

DEAD ON ARRIVAL

IN THE Lodge, Dawson's door opened immediately at Hyer's light rap. Rich Lanning looked out. He said, "So there you are." Then quickly, "Where's Marcia?'

"Asleep. We've been talking to Owen."

"Is she all right?" Rich's eyes were haggard.

"She's all right." Hyer walked into the room.

Dawson sat on the bed in a dressing gown. Augusta Warren stood massively in the middle of the room, and surveyed Hyer with a forbidding eye. She saw the machine gun and gasped.

Hyer said, "You people keep strange hours up here in the hills."

"Where have you been?" Augusta demanded. Then her glance fell on Quick who had followed his employer into the room. "Get out of here, you," she rumbled. Her face had a strained, ashen quality, and there was only a brittle remnant of the robust vigor that had marked her earlier in the night.

"He's all right," Hyer said, indicating the boy. "He came along to see I didn't get in trouble."

"The things I want to say," Augusta growled, "I can't say in front of him very well. *Point that thing some other way.*"

Dawson rose. "So you've been talking to Owen, have you?"

"I told him about those checks."

Rich said quickly, "That was a foolish thing to do."

Hyer shrugged. "He caught me off base. Anyway, it might be a good idea to face him with the signatures."

Dawson's "I'll be with you in a minute" was grim. He took his clothes from the root of the bed, picked up his shoes, and went into the bathroom.

"Yes," Augusta said in answer to Hyer's questioning glance, "Rich and me came down for a council of war. Anyway," she added, and though her bass voice strove to be casual, there was a flaw in her carelessness, "I couldn't sleep none."

Hyer said, "I shouldn't be surprised," mildly. He turned to Rich who was still standing by the door. "I suppose you couldn't sleep either."

"Exactly." Rich's manner was constrained, cool. To Quick he said, "The tradesmen's entrance is in the rear, fellow."

Quick grinned and sat down.

Rich walked toward him. "Did you hear me?"

Hyer said, "That's all right. We'll be getting out in a minute."

"When you get out," Augusta said peremptorily, "we're all getting out with you."

Unease showed faintly in Hyer's bland face. He said, "If it gives you the willies, there's no point in your going back to the cottage. Why don't you stay here the rest of the night?"

"I mean," she rumbled, and for an instant her former spirit flashed up, "we're going with you."

Hyer said, "Oh, I wouldn't think of—"

"Me and Rich are going with you." Arms akimbo, she glared.

Rich, whose attention had been deflected from Quick, said, "That's a good idea, Gussie." He looked ironically at Hyer. "You're sure it won't interfere with your professional plans?"

Hyer said, "Oh, not at all," and shifted the machine gun.

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THE five of them left the house a few minutes later and walked across the clearing. Quick led the way, followed by Rich and Augusta. Hyer, talking in a low voice to Dawson, brought up the rear, his astonishing weapon still cradled on his forearm.

"I let him think," he was saying softly, "that you had the originals with you. He'll be sore when he finds they're photostats."

Dawson chuckled. "Maybe you weren't so hasty as it looked. We'll let him trick himself into a tight spot, what?"

Hyer said, "That's always a good idea."

They waited while Quick unlocked the gate, waited again while he locked it, and then, still in the same order, followed his bobbing flashlight beam along the path.

Hyer could hear Augusta's bass rumble as she talked to Rich, twenty feet ahead.

Without quite knowing why, Hyer hugged the machine gun closer to him as he went through the darkness.

When they were halfway to the observatory, a voice at Hyer's ear said, "Bend over and lay that typewriter down, you." The command was quiet, but underscored by a firm prodding pressure just below his third rib. Hyer stopped. Dawson had stopped, too. Hyer laid the gun down.

The short stout astronomer swooped and gathered it up with swift maternal devotion. He said, "You oughtn't to've done that, you know. All right, Ned. Now, don't either of you guys move. We'd hate to have to hurt you."

He spoke pleasantly, but with a disturbing matter-of-factness.

Hyer said, "Hey," as a pair of the most expert hands he had ever encountered began rapidly searching him. It was as if a pair of small but efficient vacuum cleaners were flicking into and out of his pockets. "Listen," the detective said angrily, "what do you think you're—?"

"Shut up," Reilly commanded. "Now the other'n, Ned."

Dawson's protest was more articulate and supported by a tendency at first to resist.

There was a click from the machine gun and Reilly said menacingly, "We'd sure hate to have to hurt you guys. You'll get back everything we don't want."

In the darkness, Hyer could hear Dawson fuming. Then—the whole operation had taken less than a minute—they were alone again.

But this moment of absortive violence had seemingly set the tone of the whole interview that followed.

Owen's splendid fury when he confronted Dawson was matched by Dawson's own anger, and for a moment after they erupted into the small chaste office where Owen waited, Hyer and the powerful Augusta had to restrain Dawson physically from attacking the astrologer.

"Where are those checks?" Owen roared.

His anger had darkened his face, and a vein stood out sharply across the side of his forehead.

Dawson, white, trembling with rage, shouted, "In my safe deposit box. And I'm going to have you and your gang jailed for highway robbery—"

"Pierre!" Augusta roared.

Dawson quieted.

The two men glared at each other.

To the astrologer, Hyer said, "That was a little crude wasn't it?"

The door opened and Orson Quick came in without ceremony. In his hands he carried a miscellany of papers, billfolds, keys.

Dawson and Hyer made a lunge for him, but the boy sidestepped quickly, spread the litter on Owen's desk. "There, gents," he said, "take your pick." To Owen he handed the photostat and tissue sheets. "That's all there was," he said in disgust. "We wanted to make sure. Unless," he added, looking reflectively at Dawson, "he's got 'em in his shoes. We didn't take his shoes off yet."

Clearse Owen ran his fingers through his thick black mane and gazed at Quick with dawning admiration. Then he threw back his head and bellowed laughter. He said, "You were complaining about manners, I believe, Hyer."

"I haven't seen any improvement," Hyer said nastily, sorting out his pocket

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paraphernalia from the litter. "Picking pockets is the same in any man's law," he added.

Owen's laugh boomed again. "Now, now. Merely a little prank. You were young once, I dare say, Hyer."

"Do you deny writing those checks?" Dawson demanded.

"Why, of course I deny it."

"I suppose you know nothin' about what happened to Mr. Thayer," Augusta put in.

Owen's black, high-humored eyes met Hyer's for an instant. Then he turned to the woman. "Miss Warren, gallantry restrains me. Now if you will have your strapping protégé ask that question."

Rich took a step forward. "All right," he said pleasantly. "I will. What do you know about—?"

"I suppose," Hyer interrupted, staring hard at the astrologer, "you don't know anything about anything."

Dawson, counting the money in his billfold, checking the contents of its several pockets, muttered, "Oh no, not anything at all." He looked up furiously at Owen.

The astrologer had by this time completely regained his normal good humor. "Precisely. I don't know a thing."

There was a moment of silence.

"Then," Hyer said regretfully, "we'll have to wait until they find Jean—the cook—I guess. They're looking for him."

They *were* looking for him. The search, which had got under way the afternoon before, had been spurred anew that night by MacKinnon after his conversation with Hyer. It was destined to be a short search.

Jean was found. He was found shortly before eight in an upper berth on a train approaching Utica from New York, approaching Utica where, in the usual course of events he would have changed to another train and arrived in Big Moose at ten-forty.

He had been dead several hours.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

"South of the Border"

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By JIM KJELGAARD

Author of "From Misty Swamp," "The Red Bull Bellows," etc.

Suddenly Pete threw himself headlong—and Frank Bures' bullet whistled over his head

Two for One

In Casby they could tell you an interesting story of the disappearing peddlers. But this is about the one who did not disappear: of the remarkable things he carried in his pack and on his head

PETE MALONE came into Casby just as the sun was sinking on a spring day in 1881. Casby was the palm of a hand, the thumb and fingers of which were formed by the five valleys stretching away from it. And it was in Casby that Denny Minguez had disappeared last fall while on a peddling trip.

Casby was like a thousand other towns that spring up in virgin timber fields: new, loud, and muddy. And somewhere in the hills about it Denny Minguez lay.

Pete pulled his cap, made of stiff cloth and with a visor extending ten inches out from his temple, a little lower on his head. He adjusted his pack, bulging with the incredible assortment of articles the peddler must keep in stock, and entered the village.

The board path that made Casby's sidewalk was spattered with spring mud and crowded with broad-shouldered, bearded

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lumberjacks among whom a peddler was sure of good sales. A lumberjack with money would buy anything.

Without breaking his stride or disturbing the pack on his back, Pete pulled from it a hand full of long black cigars. He held the cigars breast high in his left hand.

"Cigars," he chanted. "One for five pennies or six for a shilling. Built right, rolled tight, and guaranteed to dra-aw."

"Peddler! Hey, peddler!"

Pete waited patiently as five men bore down on him. They were all big and heavy men, dressed in the wool shirts and boots of the lumber country, but one stood a little apart from the rest.

He was a tall man, slighter of build than the others. His face was covered with a heavy beard and his knitted hat was low on his temple, exposing only his eyes and a thin quivering nose, like the nose of a hound. And if, like the rest, he was a little drunk, he did not show it.

"Who got elected?" somebody demanded. "Who's president now, peddler?"

"Mr. Garfield defeated General Hancock," Pete said.

"What'cha got, peddler?" a big burly man who looked like an overgrown bear in his flapping woollen shirt demanded eagerly. "What'cha sellin'?"

"Cigars," Pete droned again. "One for five pennies or six for a shilling. Built right, rolled tight, and guaranteed to dra-aw."

"Huh! I bought 'em on the Barge Canal for a penny each. Bigger'n this they were, too."

"It's a hundred and sixty miles to the Barge Canal," Pete said gently. "If you want to walk it, you can still buy for a penny."

"Well, gimme six," the bear-like man said impatiently. "No, gimme twelve."

Another huge man looked at Pete's long-visored cap. "Where'ja get the hat, peddler?" he asked.

As if it had suddenly grown there, another long-visored cap exactly like the one he wore was in Pete's hand. He gave it to the huge man.

"Best wool," he said. "Made in London and the rage there. Only five dollars—paper, silver, or gold. You cannot do better."

The man took it in his ham-like fist, looked at it curiously, and tried it on. His companions guffawed. The huge man handed it back.

"Nobody but peddlers could wear them," he snorted. "What else ya got?"

"Candy," Pete droned, and his hand was full of peppermint sticks. "Tinware, neckwear, silk cloth, soap, brushes, novelties. Name it, gentlemen. I have it. My wares cannot be duplicated or bought at a lower price within a hundred miles."

THEY continued to buy cigars and harmless little knickknacks that would be pleasant toys for a night. They had money, money was to spend, and they did not care what they spent it for as long as it offered diversion. The bear-like man danced down the street banging two small frying pans together.

Three others bought what they wanted. Pete turned to the fifth man, who had held aloof.

"Can I interest you in anything?"

"Not in any of that junk. Have you any good stuff?"

"Certainly."

Pete's hand dived into a leather pouch at his belt and came out with a cloth-lined case. He opened it, and a gold watch was revealed.

"Swiss movement," Pete said. "Twenty-one jewels. The case is solid gold and hand carved. It's yours for the moderate price of one hundred and twenty-five dollars."

The man with the hound's nose looked at it narrowly, and for a long minute did not speak. Then, "I guess not."

"Diamond rings for ladies," Pete suggested. "A sapphire and a ruby brooch. Gold bands—"

"I think not," the fifth man said, moving away.

Pete stood looking after him. Denny Minguez, too, had carried watches and jewelry. And now—

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Pete turned as someone nudged his elbow. It was the huge man who had tried on the long-visored cap.

"I like you, peddler," the huge man said. "I like you on account you wear such a funny hat. But that's Frank Bures. He lives up Bures Run. An' no peddler what ever went up Bures Run ever come back to Casby. You shouldn't of showed him that stuff."

The man's face showed strain.

"Thank you, sir," Pete said courteously. "And now, will you smoke these cigars as a present from a peddler?"

The huge man grabbed the cigars and moved away. "An' for Gawd's sakes," he said over his shoulder, "don't never let on 'twas me as told you."

FOR three hours Pete dispensed his wares and news of what had happened in the outside world up and down Casby's single street. Then the novelty of his appearance began to wear off and Casby turned to other things.

Pete sought a tavern. He traded cigars for a bowl of milk and half a loaf of bread, and took it to a bench in front of an open fire where he sat down to break the bread into the milk. He ate the bread and milk with a spoon and gazed into the fire.

Denny Minguez was his cousin. Denny had set out from Wolfton last summer with a thousand dollars' worth of goods. He had last been heard from in Casby, and his wife was living at Pete's house in Wolfton. She needed that thousand dollars.

Aside from that, the Casby district needed to be made safe for peddlers. There was no use crying for Denny. Pete knew that he must be dead or he would have come home again.

The best the sheriff and local constable had been able to do was to establish the fact that Denny had been in Casby. From Casby he could have gone to any of a dozen other towns, or any of fifty camps. Busy with hundreds of strangers in a boom country, sheriffs couldn't be expected to keep track of, or care much about peddlers.

But there was Bures Run, from which no peddler had ever come to Casby again. It was easy to learn such things. A peddler found out everything if he kept his eyes and ears alert.

Pete studied his pack, out of which he could produce anything anybody asked for. He opened the leather pouch at his belt and looked inside.

It was surprising what could be sold in these wild mountains if a peddler had it to sell. Last year Pete had sold a three-hundred-dollar diamond ring to a lumberjack who hadn't looked as if he had thirty cents in his pockets. The lumberjack had wanted it for the camp cook, a lady who knew how to roast venison in a way the lumberjack liked, and whom the lumberjack hoped shortly to marry.

Pete stared solemnly into the fire. A fire at night and the pack he carried by day made up a peddler's life. But it was a good life. Pete couldn't fancy himself wanting any other. And any peddler could rest easy before the fire at night if, from the wares he had dispensed that day, he took in at least two for one.

PETE was not surprised to see the man with a nose like a hound's walk into the tavern. The buzz of conversation in the tavern faded to a hum.

Frank Bures walked to the bar, ordered a drink, and lingered over it. That was good business, Pete decided, watching him. Nobody who wanted to buy anything should let the seller know that he was anxious to buy.

Frank Bures turned to leave the bar, then as if he had just discovered Pete, came over to sit beside him.

"Did you have a good day, peddler?"

"Very fair, sir. Very fair," Pete said.

Frank Bures shrugged. "They all have some money now. Did you sell any of your jewelry?"

"Not a single piece."

"I know where you might sell some," Frank Bures said casually. "My brother

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does considerable trading, and he may be interested."

"That's very kind of you, sir," Pete said respectfully. "But I don't care to make any side trips. My itinerary is laid out. I'm sure that I'll sell it all before the season ends."

"You don't understand, peddler. My brother wouldn't be interested in one article, but in all of it."

Pete speculated. "That may be worth while. Where can I see your brother?"

"He lives in Bures Run. Follow the road past the swamp. He lives at the end of the road, the only house beyond the swamp. He carries his goods directly to the camps and villages where they're cutting timber."

"I could see him tonight," Pete said thoughtfully.

The man nodded.

"It may be worth your while. Goodbye, peddler."

"Goodbye," Pete said. "And thank you very much, sir."

. . . Pete balanced his long visored cap on his knee, and laid the empty bowl on the bench beside him as he finished the bread and milk. He put the cap on his head and stood up, facing the wall.

Everything was as it should be. He shouldered the pack and started for the door.

"Will ye be wantin' a room?" the fat tavern keeper asked.

Pete shook his head. "The night is fine for walking. I'll be a few miles on my way, and rest when I get tired."

Casby's street was all but empty now, having poured into the many taverns lining it those not already too drunk to stay awake. Pete made his way along the street to the end. Two roads swung away from there. Pete took the road into Bures Run.

The lights of Casby were still in sight when he left the road, forded the creek that coursed down Bures Run, and went into the heavy hemlock timber on the other side. With the ease of one accustomed to it he slipped through the trees.

THE swamp, when he came to it, proved to be a wide one covering both sides of the creek. The big hemlocks gave way to a straggling tangle of laurel and rhododendron. Pete climbed a little higher, getting out of the brush back into the trees.

For a moment he stood looking down at the swamp. He took off his cap and held it across his chest while he bowed his head a second.

Most of these mountain swamps had bottomless quicksand pits. Somewhere in this swamp lay the body of his cousin. Of this he felt sure.

Pete skirted the swamp until he came to a clearing in the center of which loomed the black outlines of a big cabin. The Bures house was the only only one beyond the swamp, Frank Bures had told him. He withdrew a hundred yards back into the forest and lay down with his head on his pack.

The first thin light of day filtering through the trees woke him up. He drew a loaf of bread from his pack, broke a chunk off, and ate it. With his pack on his back he crawled once more to the clearing and peered at the cabin in the center of it.

It was a big cabin, well made of logs. But there was a shoddy and neglected air about it, as if those who lived in the cabin cared nothing for it. Pete got the impression that men lived alone in the cabin, and it never knew the touch of a woman's hand.

He crouched behind a tree, watching the clearing.

After an hour two men came up the road toward the cabin.

One was the man with the hound-like nose, Frank Bures. The other was a slightly built man a little taller than the first. His face was clean shaven, but even at that distance revealed a cold brutality.

On hands and knees Pete retreated far enough back into the forest so that no one could see him from the house, and made his way to the road. It was safe now, but would not have been last night.

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The two who had just gone into the house, Pete knew, had lain all night in ambush on the road—doubtless not very far from the swamp.

Pete crossed the clearing to the cabin. He rapped on the door, and it was opened by Frank Bures. A shadow of surprise darted across his face.

"Hello, peddler," he said. "I had given up expecting you."

"Never give up expecting a peddler," Pete said easily. "We go where our customers are. And, if your brother is still interested, I would like to show him my goods."

Frank Bures narrowed his eyes. "Where did you sleep last night?"

Pete remembered the hemlock needles that he had forgotten to brush from his clothes. "In the forest."

The other nodded. "Thought you might stay the night in Casby. Come on in."

Pete entered a big room. Bear, deer, wolf, and wildcat skins were draped about on the furniture and on the floor. A rack of rifles hung on the wall and beside the fireplace was a case of pistols. On the farther wall were pegs containing a heterogeneous collection of saddles, bridles, harness, and knapsacks. Pete's expression did not change.

But the big pack in the center was the one Denny Minguez had carried into Casby.

PETE backed against the wall and took his pack from his back. The muscles beneath his over-broad shoulders rippled as he stretched. But he did not take the long-visored cap from his head or the pouch from his belt.

Frank Bures left the room to come back in a minute with the other man.

"This is my brother, Ivan," he said.

"How do you do?" Pete said graciously. "Your brother informs me that you may be interested in my jewelry."

Frank Bures, more than ever the hunting hound, stepped forward. Pete stood calmly against the wall. Nobody, unless he was a complete fool, drew a gun on a man facing him when that man's hands were close to his pockets.

But they needn't kill him here, probably didn't intend to. There wasn't another house this side of the swamp, and that meant nobody to interfere with anything the Bures brothers might see fit to do.

"It isn't Ivan," Frank Bures said, his lean nostrils twitching. "It's our brother, Gregor. He waited for you last night. When you didn't come, he returned to Casby to look for you."

"Thank you," Pete said amiably. "My thanks to both you gentlemen. I appreciate your courtesy and, by your leave, I'll take mine."

"But he wants to see you, peddler," Frank Bures insisted.

Suddenly Ivan Bures was gone from the room. Pete remained standing. He felt, but did not see, eyes other than those of Frank Bures on him. From some peep hole in the wall, Pete knew, a gun was trained on him. A wrong move and he would die in his tracks.

Still he hesitated.

"I've already lost a day," he said finally. "I had intended to go from here through the forest to the highway. If I go back to Casby, can it be arranged so I won't have to come back here?"

"What do you mean?"

"Your brother would hardly have gone to Casby with two thousand dollars," Pete pointed out. "That's my asking price for what I have here. If it can be arranged for me to receive payment in Casby, I'll go back there with you."

Frank Bures frowned. "Have you got two thousand dollars worth? Can I see it?"

"Of course."

Pete laid the contents of the leather pouch on the table. There were two watches with intricately carved cases, seven diamond rings of various sizes, a sapphire brooch and a ruby, and five gold bracelets. Frank Bures examined it.

"I guess it's there all right," he admitted. "Just a minute, peddler."

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He stepped out of the room and returned with a leather poke. He opened it to show Pete a roll of bank notes and twenty-five gold double eagles.

"Here's the money, peddler. I'll take it along with me. If my brother wants your jewelry, you'll be paid in Casby."

Pete nodded. "That's agreeable."

Pete was looking straight over Frank Bures' head at the pack Denny Minguez had carried into Casby. His eyelids were almost imperceptibly lower than they had been. No peddler could rest easy any place unless he got two for one for what he carried.

And Denny Minguez hadn't even got one for one.

PETE shouldered the pack, pulled his long-visored cap low on his forehead, and plodded patiently between the silent Bures brothers. He knew that beneath the loose coats they wore each had a gun. He knew also that they did not intend for him to get very far toward Casby.

But a man walking between two others could not be shot without his seeing it, and a peddler could pull anything out of his pack by flicking his hand.

Pete's pack rode easily on his back. Never before could he remember a time when the pack had seemed so much a part of him. It *was* part of him. A peddler's pack was his life, even though sometimes he carried his death there too.

Pete twisted the visor of his cap so that it rode a little crooked on his head.

The swamp was just ahead, and there were enough sinkholes in the swamp to hide a thousand men.

But some day Bures Run would be open to all who wanted to come that way. And who knew but that a great store would one day stand where the swamp was, be erected on the bones of Denny Minguez and the nameless other peddlers buried there? Such a store must surely thrive.

The road became muddier. The three men crowded closer together, and Pete reached up to touch the visor of his cap for the last time.

Just ahead the road was a sea of mud that must reach nearly to the knees of any man who tried to walk through it. To one side, bordering the swamp, was a raised path of muddy sods and rocks. A path scarcely ten inches wide; only one man could walk there. And Pete was prepared for Frank Bures' words.

"Go ahead, peddler."

Not looking back, Pete started across the path. The swamp at his side was a pool of liquid mud. Pete looked into it, and kept walking straight ahead. Suspicious men shot fast.

Suddenly Pete threw himself headlong, catching the edge of the raised path to keep from going into the swamp. Frank Bures' bullet whistled harmlessly overhead. Ivan Bures, shooting a second later, heard his bullet thud into the pack on Pete's back.

Pete rolled over, and when his hand came up it held a gun.

He shot twice.

Two hours later, Pete, who had cleaned and dried his clothes, knelt beside the swamp. He tore from the visor of his cap the tiny mirror that had been sewed there and threw it into the swamp.

For ten minutes more he looked solemnly into the swamp, that hid its secrets so well, then shouldered his pack and continued on toward Casby.

Denny Minguez should rest perfectly contented now. The two thousand dollars Pete had taken from Frank Bures would go to Denny's widow in Wolfton.

And, aside from that, Pete felt that Denny had received two for one for everything he had given.

Another Imaginary Moment in the Lives of Our Presidents

A fine novelet by THEODORE ROSCOE

Coming in the August 10 Argosy

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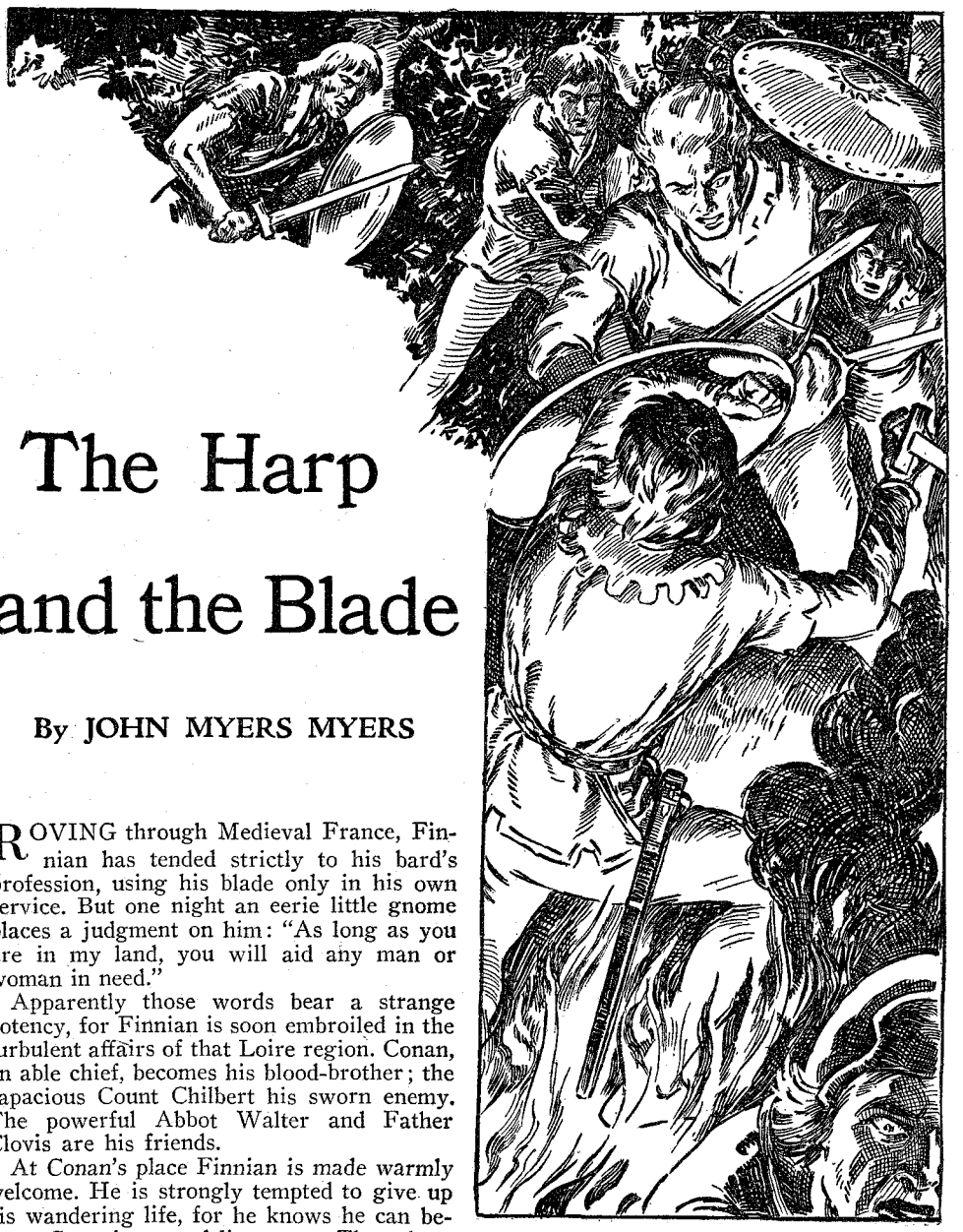

The Harp and the Blade

By JOHN MYERS MYERS

ROVING through Medieval France, Finnian has tended strictly to his bard's profession, using his blade only in his own service. But one night an eerie little gnome places a judgment on him: "As long as you are in my land, you will aid any man or woman in need."

Apparently those words bear a strange potency, for Finnian is soon embroiled in the turbulent affairs of that Loire region. Conan, an able chief, becomes his blood-brother; the rapacious Count Chilbert his sworn enemy. The powerful Abbot Walter and Father Clovis are his friends.

At Conan's place Finnian is made warmly welcome. He is strongly tempted to give up his wandering life, for he knows he can become Conan's trusted lieutenant. Then there is another excellent reason for settling down —namely the beautiful Marie, a cousin of Conan's wife Ann. But Finnian and his friends know that before they can be assured of lasting peace and content, there must be a final violent reckoning with Chilbert. So, when a lookout announces the approach of strange riders, Finnian and Conan are immediately anxious and alert. . . .

CHAPTER XXIX

THE MILITANT MONK

CONAN stood undecided a moment, then went up on the wall to see for himself. These were days when a rider might well be bringing a message

This story began in the June 22nd Argosy

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that would radically change the state of things.

I went on with my work until I heard somebody yell: "No, there are two of them!" Then curiosity sent me up on the wall also, where I shouldered my way to stand beside Conan.

He nodded to me, and we silently watched them draw near, pushing tired horses hard. After a little my friend whistled and slapped his thigh. "It's the abbot. Take a good look, Finnian."

I shaded my eyes. The rain the day before had laid the dust, so the still distant figures could be seen clearly enough in general outline. They were churchmen, all right, and one of them didn't look like an ordinary monk.

"It might be the abbot," I said cautiously.

He snapped his fingers, more excited than I had ever seen him. "Man! I hope it is!" he said with a fervor I understood. He'd been trying to win the abbot as ally for a year now. If the prelate was coming to visit him it might mean that he had at last decided to seal the entente.

The abbot was big news, and the possibility that he was arriving took everybody from work. Jabbering speculations, they swarmed up to point and stare. One child, with a boy's genius for such things, fell off the wall into the moat. Even the abbot couldn't compete with that, and the laughter while the brat was being fished out served to lighten the waiting.

Conan's attention had not been diverted, however. "It's he, all right," he said, quiet and contained now that he was sure. "Everybody off the wall except the guards," he ordered. "And when he comes don't crowd around him as if he were a dog fight."

He touched my sleeve, and we descended to the court. "Send him to us in the hall," he told the gate warden.

It was nearly lunch time, but as the meal was to be served outdoors the hall was an empty place. Conan ordered wine which we sipped disinterestedly, in strange contrast to the night before. Most of the time he paced up and down while I tapped out tunes on the table with my fingers.

Then we heard the horses coming over the bridge. Conan seated himself with a great show of nonchalance and turned his head with easy naturalness when the door opened. But it wasn't the abbot. One of our own men entered.

"The abbot says he'd like for you to come outside first," the man told Conan. "He says he has something he'd like to show us all."

THAT was a puzzler. Conan stuck out his lip, shrugged, and rose. Something strange, we saw at a glance, was undoubtedly in the air, and we approached the churchman watchfully, though with outward cordiality. The abbot on his part was neither friendly nor inimical. He greeted us, but he was terse and hard-eyed.

Seeing his mood, Conan waived ceremony. "My man said you had something you wanted to show us."

"I have." The prelate beckoned to his follower, who stepped forward with a sack of soft leather. "Yesterday," the abbot announced, "a peasant of the abbey's brought me this. He said a horseman gave it to him with the message that it was from Chilbert and that I should pass it on to you after taking what was mine."

He had spoken in a loud, resonant voice; and, looking around, I noticed that every man and woman in the place was watching and listening.

Conan never took his eyes from the churchman's face. "From Chilbert," he murmured. "So!"

"So!" the other repeated after him. "I looked in the bag, and this is one of the things I found."

Grimmer than ever, he opened the sack with great deliberation, looked to see what he wanted, then thrust in his arm. When his hand came out it was holding the head of a man by the hair.

The bloodless thing had belonged to no one I had ever seen; but Conan's oath

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was terrible with wrath and sorrow, the women shrieked, and the men groaned. This was one of the men who had gone into Gregory's fort with Conan. We had been so sure that Gregory would dare do nothing to them, and apparently *he* hadn't. It was Chilbert who had sent the message.

The abbot nodded bleakly, handed the head to the monk with him, and reached in again. Even though those assembled were anticipating the other two, they could not forbear to curse and moan when the sightless heads emerged.

"Now I'll show you my gift," the abbot said, looking from Conan to me; and before we had time to wonder he drew out a fourth head and held it high. It was my turn to cry out in helpless rage.

Sardonic even in death, Father Clovis was smiling horribly. I felt nauseated with grief and shame. He had been murdered in Gregory's fort, and it had been at my request that he had entered the trap.

Conan and I looked at each other wretchedly, then turned back to the waiting priest.

"What happened?" the abbot asked, his voice suddenly harsh with emotion. "This is all I know."

"Come on inside," Conan said, and we led him between us, Conan snarling at anybody was wasn't quick to jump out of our way. "Fulke!" he barked. "Post men at the doors with orders to let nobody enter; nobody at all!"

WITHOUT speaking to each other we marched to the table, and I poured wine for the abbot. Pointedly he pushed it aside. "Not until I hear," he said.

We made no comment, for we were on trial, and we knew it. A man of his had gone in to help us, we had got off comparatively unscathed, and the man had been left behind to die.

"You know the first of it, brother," Conan muttered, so I gulped some wine and delivered a detailed account of what had taken place after we'd left the abbey. Later Conan took up the tale with careful circumstantial accuracy.

The narrative took some while, but in all that time the abbot said not a word. He just sat there, shifting his eyes from one to the other of us constantly. If we'd been telling anything short of the strict truth I don't think we could have finished.

"And the last thing we know," Conan concluded, "is that he told Fulke where we wanted the horses. He was in no danger then, certainly, or if he was he didn't know it. There was nobody to stop him from heading straight on back to the abbey."

To our infinite relief the abbot reached out and thoughtfully began to sip his wine. "Clovis went back," he said, looking as if he were actually seeing what had transpired, "because he didn't want anybody to connect him, and therefore the abbey, with your escape. Those were my orders.

"But he disregarded his orders at one point, and that's what tripped him. Somebody must have seen him talking to you when he met you coming up the hill."

I groaned inwardly, knowing that it was on my account that Clovis had taken unnecessary chances. "Even if they did see him," Conan objected, "why shouldn't he talk to us? They couldn't have caught him at anything else or they would have stopped him. The abbey has no quarrel with me, and the mere fact that he didn't betray me on sight couldn't be taken as proof that he helped me."

"No," the prelate agreed. "But don't forget the heads were sent not by Gregory but by Chilbert. He'd be an angry man at finding that his prize was gone."

Chilbert must, indeed, have slavered with fury, and at another time we might have enjoyed the thought hugely. We could laugh at nothing then, however.

"All right," Conan picked up and followed out the suggested line of speculation, "Chilbert had Gregory on the run. Maybe he even accused him of selling me back to myself.

"In any case he wasn't cutting much

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of a figure, and Chilbert treated him like a vassal, taking charge of his fort while he investigated the circumstances of the escape. He found that I had three men there, which would serve to clear Gregory perhaps, but he killed them out of spite. As for Clovis—"

"He might have shown he was amused at your escape," the abbot said sadly. "He would laugh, you know."

"That," I said, "or the coincidence of Clovis' arrival a few hours before mine may have been more than Chilbert could overlook."

"That's likely to be it if he was convinced that you were the bard in question." Conan refilled the cups and put his elbows on the table. "It would eat his brain, if he knew that the man who had hoodwinked him this time was the one who had previously clubbed him, stolen his pet horse, and snatched me out of his hands once before. It might well make him crazy enough to kill any possible accomplice."

The abbot nodded. "Be that as it may, my man is dead, and Chilbert is the avowed murderer. You have used the word 'crazy', and the count never did a madder thing. No doubt he imagines in his growing power that he can intimidate the abbey by such a gesture."

He put both clenched fists on the board before him. "All he has done is to declare war. Had Gregory protested, or even killed Clovis, I would have been willing to concede some justice; but I concede nothing to Chilbert. He has murdered for spite, as you have said, and he will be paid for it."

The abbot next leaned forward a little. "Conan," he said challengingly.

My friend's voice was quiet. "Yes?"

"You have offered alliance in the past, and I refused to commit myself. Probably I was wrong."

CONAN waved the suggestion of guilt aside. "There was nothing, as you saw it, to be gained by fighting before you had to, and you argued reasonably that I was too much of an unknown quantity."

"Exactly. But now I see that though the abbey will still gain nothing concrete by fighting, Chilbert means to swallow us if we don't. And the fact that Gregory is now his man puts him in a much stronger position.

"I always knew that the count wanted us to pay tribute to him, but the killing of our envoy and the flaunting of that killing before us show that he now thinks he has the force to crush us into helpless submission.

"I'd hoped that I could maintain a balance of power that would leave us all free to guide our respective peoples as we saw fit, but Chilbert won't accept so rational a situation."

"No," Conan agreed. "I'm no fool to want empire. I only want my people to be let alone to live as men. Chilbert does want empire, and he wants nobody to live as a man except himself."

The prelate slammed the table with the flat of his hand. "He wants to rule everything, so I say he shall rule nothing." His strong face was seamed with lines of determination. "If you'll ride with me now—for I think that now before he is ready to take the aggressive is the moment for the first blow—I pledge that the abbey will stand or fall with you."

So the pact was made at last, and we would take pleasure and confidence from the idea later. Just then, however, we could only remember that it had been formed because of the death of a man we'd rather have alive. Grimly we drank to the entente; then Conan ordered lunch to be brought inside to us. We ate sparingly, each one mulling over plans and contingencies in silence, and finally Conan sent for Jean and Rainault. After a few words of explanation to them, the council of war began.

"Chilbert will no doubt be south again on his own proper holdings," the abbot said. "He'll be getting ready to move against us right after his harvesting."

"We're all waiting for that to be over,"

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Jean remarked. "Naturally there's a temptation to hammer them right away, but that means starving through the winter. There's not much point in winning a victory if you're going to be a skeleton after it."

The abbot signified agreement. "All right. But they are probably reasoning that we are so reasoning." He looked at Conan, his eyes far back in his head. "We've both had men murdered by a dog who did it just to defy us. I think the best cure for the arrogance of that dog is to prove that we can carry the war to him."

"That's true." Conan was thinking it out carefully. What with the harvest and the building of his new fort he had two vitally important projects that were occupying the full time of all his men.

On the other hand, the moral effect of an unexpected raid would put Chilbert and his allies on the defensive, temporarily, at least. And proof that Conan and the abbot were acting in concert would give them much more to consider.

CHAPTER XXX

TOMORROW TO BATTLE

MEANWHILE I also had been giving the proposition attention. If my knowledge of the situation and terrain had blank spots, it was none the less generally sound.

"Look, Conan," I said. "That day I first met you; whose lands were you on?"

"Both the Old Farms are mine, but I was being chased off Chilbert's land —Oliver's holding." His eyes lighted; then he squinted. "You're right, brother."

"What's he right about?" Rainault demanded.

Conan drained his cup and thrust it aside. "We can't afford a real invasion now any more than Chilbert can, but a quick harrying would be worth while provided there is a definite objective to pay the price of the risk.

"Chilbert's own fort is too far away and too strong to consider now, but Oliver would be easier pickings. We might get near enough by night to be on him before he could crawl in his hole."

"He'd do for an object lesson if we bagged him." The abbot drew his lips back from his teeth. "He's one of the canniest chiefs, not counting Gregory, that Chilbert has under him."

"He is also," Jean put in, "the next best louse, even counting Gregory. I rode up one time after he'd tied three peasants in a shack before he fired it." He grimaced savagely. "They weren't quite dead when I got there."

"You may get a chance to remind him of that," Conan said.

Rainault, who was captain of the garrison and who therefore went on expeditions only in cases of extreme emergency, looked at the rest of us with disgusted envy while we concluded our plans.

"If this undertaking is satisfactory to you," Conan said to the prelate, "I'll contribute a third of the men I've got working on the fort. I can spare no more of them. The harvesting, you will understand, can't be interfered with at all."

"Most of us are busy at it, too," the abbot said. "Yes, the plan is acceptable, and I'll match you man for man." He considered a moment. "The Old Farms would be the best place to meet, and the southeast corner of the far clearing would be the nearest point to Oliver's hall."

"Right," Conan said. "At sundown tomorrow?"

"A good time," the abbot stated as he rose to leave.

There was mutual confidence, but it was all too solemn and businesslike for any show of cordiality or enthusiasm. We four saw the churchman to the gates and bade him a quiet farewell.

Then Conan swore feelingly. "I've got to tell Ann I'm riding again," he said morosely.

"You won't have to wait long," Rainault remarked. "Here she comes now."

I watched my friend put an arm around his wife and enter the hall with her, then

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I snapped my fingers. For once there was someone for me to talk things over with, too, and I went eagerly to find her.

I may have swaggered a little as I did so, for I was exhilarated by the knowledge of my new position. This time I was not just something caught between the anvil and the hammer, but a man striving to achieve definite goals whose winning would have a permanent bearing on his way of life.

Why hell—and I shook my head at the amazing rightness of it—I was going out to fight for my own chosen clan, my own land and living, my own woman. The more I thought about it and all it implied, the more it went to my head. For the first time in my life I was contemplating battle with something like pleasure.

ON THE other side of the hall I found Raymond and Marie, still seated at one of the otherwise empty lunch tables. She looked up to search my face as I stood smiling at her.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Oh, Conan and the abbot made a treaty," I said easily. "Mutual aid, stand or fall."

"And?" she prodded.

"And they're going to start activities right away. Or tomorrow, rather."

Her quick concern was gratifying. It was childish to take such delight in it, but I couldn't remember when I'd had anybody concerned about me before.

"And does 'they' include you?"

"Surely," I said, a little surprised. I thought she would have taken that for granted.

She stood then, her eyes very large and serious. Raymond rose, too. "I wish I could go with you," he said wistfully.

With an expansive smile I clapped him on the back. "Don't worry about it. This is just a small raid. The main party won't come off for some while. By that time you'll have enough meat on your bones to stand the gaff."

"Yes, but I wish I could show you and Conan what I can do," he mumbled miserably.

"You'll have plenty of time." I took one of Marie's hands. "Will you get out of here?" I asked him pleasantly.

He started, then smiled slowly. "I'll be up to see you leave tomorrow," he promised as he sauntered off.

The girl's mouth twitched in a smile an instant before she resumed her sober appraisal of me. "You came to tell me right away," she remarked strangely.

"Of course." I was so obsessed with my new point of view that I couldn't fully appreciate why she might be struck by its suddenness.

"That's nice," she decided. "Is it going to be dangerous, Finnian? No, that's nothing to ask you after what you did for Conan. You don't think in such terms."

I stared at her. If she only knew how scared I had been. Sometimes I thought women knew everything about men, and sometimes I was convinced men were as strange as goblins to them.

"This may not amount to anything at all," I told her frankly. "Unless we're lucky it's only a gesture to show Chilbert and his hangers-on that we're acting in unison and that we dare invasion. Of course, if we happen to stumble on something we may achieve practical gain as well."

"You're speaking of yourself as part of this." Her free hand motioned to include the court; then she put it on my arm. "Are you really, or are you thinking of that man?" She shuddered. "That fourth head that the abbot showed us, I mean. I heard you cry out, Finnian."

She was all sweet understanding then—everything that I could ask of a woman. "That man was dear to you, wasn't he? What was he like?"

I tried to tell her about it. I wanted to be able to talk to her as naturally as Conan talked to Ann, but I began at the wrong end. "Oh, I only saw him two or three times."

Her face grew blank, and I knew that she had been anticipating some tale of

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a life-long friendship. "You see," I said earnestly, "he was killed not only because the abbot sent him on a ticklish mission but because he was for me."

"And you felt that way about him. But why, if you hardly knew each other?"

"Well, there are plenty of people you like just because they're pleasant fellows who happen to infest the premises. Every now and then, though, you meet a man who actually knows what you're saying and doing. Clovis was such."

"You're funny and always will be," she said, but she reached up to pat my cheek. "You don't do anything for rational motives the way anybody else might. All the others have axes to grind; but you're going along because Chilbert murdered a man who laughed at the right time, or something." She looked at me with affectionate amusement. "And you'll never change."

I almost told her that I already had changed, that I was fighting now in hope of earning my own land and hall. I almost told her that I knew the woman I wanted in my house, but two things deterred me.

One was the instinctive feeling that it would be better to wait until I had something specific to offer. The other and more forceful one was the knowledge that this moment, when she was lovely with warm intimacy, was no time to waste on words.

Within her pliant strength she was a fine woman to hold, and the way she answered my kiss was deeply satisfying. But here in the court by daylight prolonged embraces were not in order. Reluctantly I dropped my arms and perched on the table beside her. Our talk was desultory, but its very casualness betokened the new strength of feeling between us.

CHAPTER XXXI

SWORD SON

WE STARTED before dawn. We intended to rest both horses and men halfway there so that neither would be too tired for night travel. Early as it was, everybody was up to see us leave. Marie looked pale and fragile under the single torch that lit a corner of the hall. I said farewell to her last and made no bones about the fact that I was not giving her a mere kiss of friendship.

As I was turning from her I caught Ann's eye upon us, a fleeting look of speculation lighting her anxiety at Conan's going. Few women are ever too busy for match-making, I reflected, as I followed Conan out. In this instance, I reasoned, it would be a good thing.

Ann would probably brace Marie about it, with that lack of reticence concerning mating peculiar to the female. Yes, a little talking it up ought to help me along, and I had a pleasant vision of the two women discussing Conan and myself with respective possessiveness.

True to his word, Raymond was there to give me a leg up. It was a nice gesture from a man not yet any too well, and I shook his hand cordially.

"Don't let anybody walk off with the fort," I told him.

"It'll be here," he promised. Then Conan gave the word, and we left.

We slept through the hottest hours of the day, as per schedule; and, after eating we rode the few remaining miles to keep tryst. It was still a little short of sundown when we arrived, but the monks were already there. While our men and the fathers fraternized, the abbot and a priest called Father Jacques sat apart under a tree with Jean, Conan and myself.

"I've got a man who can lead us there in the dark," the abbot began briskly. "It'll be slow going, for the horses will have to be led, of course. But as it's only about twelve miles we can make it before first light. So if none of Oliver's villeins get wind of us and manage to warn him, we might accomplish something worth while."

"Let's decide what we're trying for," Conan said. "Naturally what we see when we get there may change our plans entirely; but it's my conclusion that we'll

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have the best chance of drawing more blood than we lose by laying off in the woods and waiting for them to come out. That's a pretty strong fort of Oliver's and liberally garrisoned, to boot. We can't storm it with the force we have."

"Just what have you in mind then?" Father Jacques enquired.

"Well, it's harvest time, so if it's fair weather a good part of the garrison will come out to work in the fields. Maybe they'll even be mowing far enough away from the fort for us to be able to cut them off."

"You're right," the abbot declared. "Then with half the defenders driven off we might be able to break in and take Oliver. Or he might make it easy for us to snap him up by coming out to take a look at his crops."

"There's a pretty good chance of that," Jean said. "It wouldn't be reasonable for a man to stay in his hall all day during the harvest."

"Let's get there," I said as Conan looked to see whether I dissented.

THAT was a brutal night of endless slow motion. It's bad enough to go for hours through a benighted forest without having the faintest concept of time or distance. But when one also has to lead a horse that feels it's all a lot of foolishness, exasperating hard work is added to weariness and boredom.

In the earlier stages I tried to relieve the tedium by singing, but I had to interrupt myself so often to swear at my mount that it was hardly effective entertainment. By midnight even the cursing had become routine and dispirited. We kept moving only because we knew we had to.

There was still no sign of darkness lifting when the word was quietly passed back from our guide that we were on the edge of Oliver's cleared land. We all fumbled around until we found a place to tie our mounts. Then we sat dully in the pre-morning chill and watched for the sky to change. It did after a while, and we roused ourselves to steal up behind trees and bushes on the forest fringe and peer out at the fort.

The earthworks looked quite high, and it was a place of some size. About half a mile away it was, and the intervening fields were only partly harvested. A road ran out from the gate, at right angles to our course but soon switching away east.

By the time it was light enough for us to make out all that, I could see the watchers on the walls, and I studied the fort more closely. As Conan had stated, it was not a place likely to be taken suddenly or with ease.

I looked at my friend where he lurked by a large oak, and he signaled that he'd like a word with me. We had to be careful about speech, because a voice can carry surprising distances over open fields; therefore we retired a certain distance before holding a whispered council with the abbot concerning the orders for the day.

These were in chief a warning against speech, and against approaching the clearing unless so commanded, and an admonition to keep weapons from exposure to any trifling gleam of sunlight. If they detected us before we were ready to act, our painful trip would be fruitless.

We set men to keep track of developments, then ate a cold breakfast washed down with wine. That strengthened us against the cool dampness, and we felt more cheerful. "I bet Oliver wouldn't enjoy his own breakfast if he knew who'd come to visit him," Conan chuckled.

"You don't think he likes us?" I asked.

"Why I suppose he figures we were pretty hard on him last time," he said judiciously. "But you know how it is. You get carried away by the spirit of the thing."

"Certainly I know how it is," I assured him, "and I'm a trifle surprised that he isn't big enough to look at it from that angle. I wonder if it could have been your bouncing that stone block off him that he objects to. Come to think of it, he wouldn't speak to us after that."

"It could be; it could be," Conan's lips

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were pursed in thought. "I wonder if he keeps any cats now?" he asked reflectively.

I snickered, then smiled inwardly as I happened to notice the others present. Jean was red-faced from effort. He wasn't used to controlling laughter. Father Jacques was looking non-plussed, while the abbot was regarding us with patient benevolence. He was a man I much admired, but folly was beyond him.

ABOUT an hour later the sentinels we'd posted returned to say that the men were leaving the fort for the fields. We sneaked forward, but to our intense disappointment they turned off to work on the other side of the fortress.

We debated attempting to skirt the clearing but decided against it. Not only would our presence be betrayed if we moved by daylight, but we would lay ourselves open to the danger of being cut off and trapped.

After sending our guide to watch the harvesters, with instructions to set fire to the crops if we should succeed in distracting them by an attack of some sort, we sat like ravens waiting for a battle to leave the corpses to them.

It was doubtless exceedingly boring to some, but I made myself comfortable, a-dream with my new prospects. I didn't even bother to look very often, being certain my attention would be called to any important development. It was almost noon when that happened.

"Finnian!" Conan whispered excitedly. "What do you make of that?"

Peering forth, I was brought sharply back to actuality. A troop of horsemen was on the road, not departing from the fort but going toward it. This was something that called for a prompt decision. If they didn't prove too numerous, they might be the victims we were awaiting.

Gambling on the probability that Oliver's watchers would be preoccupied with the men on the road, Conan risked sending a man up a tree to count the newcomers. Meanwhile every man stood to his horse.

Conan and I caught the man to silence his fall as he dropped to the ground. "Over twenty, maybe thirty," was his report.

We numbered thirty-five ourselves, which made attack feasible if we could be sure of getting out from under before the garrison could aid these others. We looked at the fort once more to make certain. There was no excitement there, which meant that the newcomers were recognized allies, and therefore our foes.

"Our horses have had a good rest," the abbot said. "We should be able to charge through and drive back before they can be reinforced. If we regain the woods before they catch up with us, they'll have a hard time cornering us."

"They might not enjoy it if they do," Conan observed. "We'll hit them as they round the bend, I suppose?"

It was the obvious place, and the prelate nodded. "Give the signal," he whispered as he turned toward his horse.

Our foe was still a good distance off, but the horses were moving at high speed. They were so obviously making the old meal-time spurt that we grinned.

"Those nags have their hearts set on hay," Conan said with satisfaction. "They're not going to be interested in anything so non-essential as a fight."

I left him and returned with both our mounts. All the others were already astride, edging cautiously nearer to the clearing. We waited a moment longer, by which time the leaders were almost to the bend. Conan gave me a knee up and vaulted astraddle his own horse.

"All right," he said quietly.

OUR crashing through the brush out into the open was their warning, but by the time they comprehended the extent of their danger we were well on our way. There was a stretch of barley to surge through first, then there was new stubble, and the horses could run.

Meanwhile there were shouts from the wall and startled yells from the men on the road. Those yells considerably frightened the horses of our enemy; instead of

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veering to face us, they kept on bolting for the oats.

But we would undoubtedly reach them before they reached the fort; so unless they lined up for a counter charge we'd wash them away as a freshet does sand. They tried to meet us as soon as they decided they couldn't avoid us, but, fighting their nervous and indignant horses, they couldn't attain much momentum.

As I shrugged my shield into place and drew my sword, I was looking them over, mount and man.

"There's Oliver himself!" Jean cried with fierce triumph, but it wasn't a rider that held my attention first. My eye was taken by a splendid bay, the finest horse I had ever seen. I didn't need to strain to see who was on it.

"Chilbert!" I called to Conan.

He looked, then headed directly for the count. "He's mine, brother!" he cried, and I accepted that. Oliver was the one I would try for.

They did their best to meet us, as I've said. For a moment I could see their wrathful or frantic expressions, those of men who knew their hopeless disadvantage, and then we were on them. I don't know whether I killed anyone on that charge or not. As Oliver had shifted his position by the time we encountered them I contended myself with indiscriminate hacking.

But the massed force of our charge was terrific. We blasted them apart, knocking some from their mounts and riding them down, wounding some with our swords, killing others.

"They got between us! I had him, and they got between us!" I heard Conan lament as we turned to bite them again.

They had attempted to reorganize, but they were too hard hit. I heard Oliver shrieking excitedly and Chilbert crying orders in the peculiarly cold voice I remembered him using just before he murdered the Saxon youth.

As I turned my mount, I saw men issuing from the fort. No doubt the harvesters were on their way also, and well armed, too, for no sane men would work in the open without weapons handy.

But we had time for one more good charge. However, they saw at the last moment that they couldn't succeed in organizing effectively. Or rather Chilbert saw, and they scattered before us at his command. He was right, for though it proved utterly fatal to the fragment we caught, more escaped our compact onslaught than would have survived if they'd stood against us.

Chilbert himself killed a monk who sought to block his retreat, coolly avoided Conan's attack and hazed the bay away at a terrific speed. My friend started to follow, but I had had that horse under me and knew what it could do.

"No use!" I called. "He can be back from Home before you're halfway there."

Conan was some strides ahead of me, but, remembering my knowledge, he turned to aid in making as much havoc as possible before we had to break away. But there was no one, we discovered, whom we could now catch with safety. The unmaimed and still mounted survivors were too near their swiftly approaching comrades to make following them worth while. Our men reined in to jeer loudly, and a few engaged in pilfering the dead and wounded.

BUT there was one major episode of the fight left. The abbot had headed Oliver off and was remorselessly intercepting each attempt at flight which the red headed man made. Finally Oliver charged in desperation, and that was his undoing.

The churchman warded a sword blow, then a second. A moment later he found the opening he wanted and swept his own blade through Oliver's neck. The head actually lofted a little before it struck the ground, bounced and rolled.

Leaning from his saddle, the prelate speared the head with his brand and held it high. "That's for Clovis!" he shouted after Chilbert. He was no ritualist then.

We took one final survey of the pos-

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sibilities and instantly decided they would remain unfavorable. Chilbert knew what he was doing and had stopped his mounted men until his foot troops from the fields, now nearly flush with them, could arrive to form a line which could fold and trap us if we were fools enough to advance.

Had I been in Chilbert's place I would have done exactly what he did. He was betting that our success would inspire us to attack again. But the death of Oliver had given us satisfaction enough. Thirty thousand Olivers would not compensate for Father Clovis as a man, but in their value to their respective factions one could be crossed off against the other.

Likewise, two or three men lay dead for each of the fellows assassinated in Gregory's fort, and others, if they survived, would not feel well for a long time. We had done as well as we could have hoped for, indeed a little better. The more we lingered the more we would jeopardize our gains.

"Come on away!" Conan ordered, "and make it fast!"

A few, full of their triumph, hesitated in wonder at this order for retreat. The abbot glowered at them. "Anybody who wants to stay and fertilize Chilbert's field can do so," he said. "The others will come along now!"

When we fled Chilbert followed us, but that was more for the morale of his people than anything else. As mass tactics would be rendered impossible by the trees, his advantage in numbers would be largely nullified. Attacking us would resolve into a haphazard business, a series of single combats. It would have only small results until the foot soldiers arrived. The latter could come in among us with knives and pikes to bring down our horses.

They would take a little time to arrive, however, and within the border of the woods we halted and faced our immediate pursuers for a stalemate. They were hoping still that foolhardiness would put us into their hands, and I could see Chilbert glaring, fiercely willing us to stay where we were.

CONAN winked at me. "Give them a sword song, brother," he urged. "I can enjoy it now."

We were gay with triumph and we had something of a right to be, since that swift blow had succeeded with a cost to us of but one man.

The loss of Oliver would tell heavily on Chilbert not only because he had been a valuable lieutenant but because word of it would rapidly go everywhere, diminishing the count's prestige. Scoring the first gains is always taken for a powerfully fair omen.

Feeling as I did, I welcomed Conan's suggestion, and I saw that the monks were looking at me with as keen anticipations as our own men showed. At the moment every one of them, from the abbot on down, was thinking with a warrior's mind.

I looked at the enemy, who were also, though sullenly, giving me their attention, and I laughed. I would need no harp to help me hold this audience. As for the song, it was easy to decide upon, for there was only one of the sort I'd ever made in French.

Women save things; men are spillers,
Renders, breakers, cleavers, killers.
The sword knew that.

I was glad; my hand was ready,
For the call was stirring, heady
When the sword spoke.

"Have done now with loving, laughing,
Hunting, sleeping, singing, quaffing,"
The sword said: "Seek!"

"What?" I asked, "should I be finding—
Land or cattle for my minding?"
The sword said: "No!"

"Would you have a man my questing,
Met in pride but left unjesting?"
The sword said: "Yes!"

"Would you have him broken, battered,
Carved, left bloodless, headless, shattered?"
The sword said: "Right!"

"Any man could suit your needing
For a life let out by bleeding?"
The sword said: "Wrong!"

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"There's a man for whom my hating
Might by ending him know sating."
The sword said: "Good!"

He was tall, a strong one, daring,
Facing us unawed, uncaring.
The sword said: "Strike!"

Smiling first, he soon was shrinking;
And as it bit deeply, drinking,
The sword said: "Ah!"

We were savage at his worsting,
And, though slaking, still athirsting,
The sword said: "More!"

Finding man, we left him cuttings
Fit for kites at twilight gluttings.
The sword said: "Done!"

"Done!" all our men echoed at the top of their voices and cheered, while our foemen scowled at us, muttering. But Chilbert looked to see that his harvesters had almost caught up. His face lighted with the assurance that he had us.

But Conan chuckled. "Goodbye, Chilbert."

"Home!" the abbot ordered tersely, and we wheeled. Our scout, who had rejoined us to report the crops not dry enough for burning, led off briskly, and we swept after him. Chilbert followed us for a ways, but once again he was forced to concede that there was little gain in attacking, even if he could catch us, once his footmen were outdistanced. So he gave up, and we strung out in single file, tired men but talkatively delighted with ourselves.

The abbot, whose stronghold was by far the nearest urged us to rest there before continuing on to the fort. Keenly as we were looking forward to reporting our success to those anxiously waiting at home, the good sense of the churchman's suggestion was obvious. So we headed for the monastery, excitement seeping down from us to leave us worn, drowsy riders.

CHAPTER XXXII

DEAD FIRE

WE WERE halfway home from the abbey the following day when we noticed considerable smoke a couple of hundred yards south of our path. Any sign of fire in a forest country must be investigated, so we promptly tethered our horses and went to take a look.

It was brush fire, fortunately already dying down for lack of wind, and we made short work of beating out what was left of it.

Jean looked around to make sure of his bearings. "Bertram lives around here," he told Conan.

We were starting to leave as he made this remark, but Conan halted abruptly. "That's the charcoal burner?"

"Yes." Jean's gesture indicated general rather than specific knowledge. "But it's not far from here," he said positively. "It might be the source."

"We'll find out," Conan stated, and we advanced gingerly, coughing because of the smoke but not too much bothered by the heat. The forest was moist enough to save the big trees from firing. Only the brush and some saplings had caught.

"There's what's left!" one of the men exclaimed, pointing to a small, smoke-misted clearing.

There were undoubtedly the ashes of a shack there. As we approached I noticed that a couple of the base logs still glowed dully. With our smarting and weeping eyes we were slow to make out details or to tell wood from other charred matter, but suddenly Jean swore with hysterical horror. Any man would have under the circumstances. He had just stumbled over the badly crisped body of a woman.

In another minute we discovered the corpse of a child. "You can't tell whether fire killed them or not," Conan said, coughing. "Make a good search for Bertram."

"Maybe he went to the fort to tell you about it," someone suggested. But he hadn't.

We found him after a while, half in and half out of the spring. He had a gaping sword wound, and he was burned away in the legs. He had probably been left for dead and had somehow reached the spring in an effort to save himself

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from the flames. His misfortune was that he had succeeded. Terribly enough, he was still alive.

We didn't know it at first, and Conan rolled him over to make certain of his identity. "It's Bertram, all right," he said; that brought the fellow to.

I think the stunning intensity of his pain was its own anaesthetic, for he didn't groan. He just opened his eyes and spoke like a man just waked from a drunken stupor. "Conan." He said the word flatly, without emotion.

I, who had never seen the man before, was hard put to look at him. It was doubly bad for Conan. As this man's chief he owed him protection. But, too, once that had failed, he owed him vengeance. He bent very close, unable to touch him again for fear of adding to his misery, but trying to reach him by force of mind.

"You're right; it's Conan, Bertram. Who did it? Tell us, man! Who did it?"

We were afraid he wouldn't answer, but he did finally. He was completely detached, so much so that he didn't seem to be answering a question. Rather he gave the impression of having changed the subject after a suitable pause.

"Outlaws."

ONLY one local band of outlaws was known to me personally, so I naturally thought of it and of the leader who had used me as his zany. "Ask him if it was Piers," I said.

But, whether he knew or not, he was too far gone to tell us that. Our queries, however, had started a disjointed but not unrelated train of thought. And what he said hit each man of us.

"They didn't have to torture and kill the little girl."

Conan gave me one look, and I know at that moment we were all glad of the smoke which granted us pardon for coughing, clearing our throats, and having

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tears in our eyes. "No," Conan said very gently. "No, Bertram, they didn't have to do that."

With an inhuman, writhing motion the charcoal burner twisted over on to his stomach again, and Conan rose, motioning to Jean. There was only one thing left that a friend could do for that tortured wisp of a man. Jean crossed himself, asked Christ for understanding, drew his sword, and killed Bertram.

After giving all three members of the family shallow burial we went seeking signs of the outlaws' path of advance. We found their tracks shortly, and after following them a little ways to make sure of where they were heading, we ran for the horses.

None of us said anything lest he be guilty of crying a false alarm, but all of us had the same fear curdling our stomachs. The tracks of those murderous woods-scurriers seemed to be leading toward Conan's fort.

Suspicion became conviction down the path a way, for they had cut into it. We growled and gave our horses all they could take. Our feelings of triumph and self-satisfaction were gone now; we were soured, silent men. We had our minds on the uncompleted portion of the fort; and there was more to worry about because we couldn't judge just how large a force was preceding us. The tracks told only that it totaled a considerable number.

I myself could not shake the notion that Piers and his crew were the raiders in question. I didn't reckon them a powerful force alone, but I recalled Piers' boast that he could muster other outlaw bands at will. I had once laughed at that, but I didn't now. Who could predict what one lucky charge might accomplish against a makeshift wall? For a moment before I suppressed it, shuddering, I had a picture of that rabble pouring into the court, mad for theft and desecration.

"It's probably Piers," I said. Not that the remark meant anything in particular. I was merely speaking out of nervousness. And out of some wishful thinking.

"Very likely," Conan said. "He's got the largest of the outlaw bands. But, of course, there's no constancy in the size of those gangs. He may have more than we figure."

"I've been enjoying thinking about that, too," I said. "One of his scouts might have seen us riding to Oliver's and figured it was a good time to attack."

"Very likely," he agreed soberly. "Well, we'll know soon."

IT WAS anticlimax when we did. The outlaws had made across fields to the fort, but there was now no sign either of battle or of burning. Moreover, men were stirring about outside the walls with every appearance of casualness.

Faintly we heard the watchman's cry announcing that a bunch of riders was sighted, and those outside started to run for shelter. But that was standard practice. We were reasonably sure that the men were ours, and we slowed down, though still puzzled as to what had become of the outlaws.

We got part of the answer when we were near enough to see that some of the men we had thought harvesting had been digging holes. They were partly filled up again, but it was easy to see what they were for.

"A raid beat off," Jean said, and once more we hurried our mounts.

Our people were all on the wall when we rode up. My eyes found Marie where she stood and waved, a breeze pressing her dress closely against her body. It was a grand, lovely sight.

"You needn't have gone off," Rainault called down. "We just had us a fight by staying right at home."

Now that we were relieved of anxiety about the fort we remembered Bertram. "Was it Piers?" Conan demanded.

The question surprised Rainault a little. "Yes. Why?"

"We'll tell you in a minute."

When we were inside and had gathered to talk, I had my arm around Marie as

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if it had been a lifetime habit. "What happened here, first?" Conan wanted to know.

Rainault, as garrison commander, made the report. "About two hours ago Piers and his buzzards showed up. The immediate problem was to keep them from destroying the crops."

"Right. Well?"

"I sent out horsemen under Fulke for that. But Piers didn't try to do anything but attack the fort. He had us split up, he saw the weak spot in the wall, and he may even have known that you were away."

"I think he did. So?"

"So he rushed the wall at the weak point, and we were there waiting for him. If he'd won right away he would have been all right. As it was, we held them off long enough for Fulke to come up and take them in the rear. They left after that.

"We hazed them into the forest, but with you absent and things being as they are I couldn't spare enough men to make following worth while."

"Sound, and damned good work!" Conan praised him. The elbow of the arm that wasn't holding Ann jabbed Fulke in the ribs, and the youngster gasped for breath. "What did you drive 'em off with," his chief asked, "that viol of yours?"

"Let us have no mock of minstrels," I said in my deepest voice. "Minstrels are the preservers of fame."

"And the prime destroyers of all known drinks," Conan rejoined. Then we were serious again.

"Did we lose any men?"

"No," Rainault said. "I've been making the business out for more than it really was. Those outlaw bands never plan anything; they just do it, and if it doesn't work they quit.

"We'd roughed 'em up so by the time they'd got across the moat that there wasn't much left of their ambition to take the wall. Some of the lads were cut up, of course, but only one got a bad dose."

He looked at me. "Raymond wasn't fit to go on the wall, but he did it against my orders. He'll be all right, Finnian, but he got another nasty wound simply because he wasn't strong enough to ward blows."

That was foolish of Raymond, albeit a fine kind of foolishness. Yet seeing that he had been accepted on my word I felt pretty good about it. "That's a good whelp of yours," Conan told me.

ANN looked at me with an unwonted trace of archness. "Marie's looking after him for you," she stated.

Her words combined with Conan's made me know a chief's pride for the first time in my life. My grip tightened on the girl's waist. "I'll see him," I said. "Where is he?"

"I had him put in your bed, Finnian. He needed comfort."

"Naturally," I conceded cheerfully, "and I won't be needing a bed tonight, anyhow." I glanced at Conan. "I'll be ready to ride by the time a fresh horse is saddled."

"We'll leave in five minutes," he said, as I led Marie off by the hand. Raymond was awake and smiled at me in weak apology. "I always seem to be no good for anything when you come around," he complained.

His courage had really moved me, and I told him Conan's remark to cheer him up. He didn't have much, if any, fever this time, nor a very bad wound. Loss of blood was his only real trouble.

"I've got to leave again," I told him after briefly sketching our success and the wherefores of the new business in hand. I was holding Marie to me, strong with the happiness that comes to a man from knowing that the full use of himself is drawing him toward known and worthy goals. "You'll look after him for me?"

Unwittingly I was making a question with the identical words of Ann's statement, but the ostensible meaning was unimportant. In reality I was hinting to her of a life to be, during which we two as leaders should be holding ourselves re-

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sponsible for the lives and well being of our followers.

"I'll take care of him," she promised me. "Will you take care of yourself?"

"I've always made that my earnest concern," I declared, "but now I see more sense in so doing than ever before." It isn't hard to get a woman to take any remark personally, and the look I gave her left her in no doubt.

She flushed, half-smiling and half-serious. "I can count on you for that?"

"You can," I assured her, wishing that poor Raymond could take up his bed and walk. Then I heard Conan's shout and made hasty farewells.

It was not only the thought of what had been done to Bertam and his family that impelled this new expedition. The real point was that when Piers grew bold enough not only to run wild on our territory but to attack the stronghold itself, something had to be done about him. The next time, should he strike, for instance, while the garrison was drained of men for the fight with Chilbert, he might do some real damage.

"They won't go very far." I spoke from my knowledge of this feckless band. "As long as Rainault didn't follow them into the woods they'll settle down before sunset. And as long as they have no reason to expect us they won't have watchers—ones that will stay awake, that is. The only thing they'll keep on the alert for is loot."

WITHIN the trees their trail was plain as a road, but we halted after about a mile, and Conan sent my old host, Thomas the hunter, ahead to scout. The afternoon was well gone, and if our calculations were correct they would be camped somewhere comparatively near.

As for our horses, though they'd enable us to catch up with the outlaws, they would be no good to us when it came to an actual attack in the forest. We had agreed upon the obvious course of jumping the enemy on foot and by night.

A couple of hours passed during most of which we lay on our backs talking drowsily. We hadn't had a great deal of sleep recently, and once or twice I, at least, was on the verge of dozing off. Finally, however, speculations as to what was delaying Thomas roused us, then made us restless. We were sitting up, watching with disturbed impatience when he eventually reappeared.

We jumped to our feet and met him. "They're about three miles ahead," he told Conan. "Less, if anything."

"You're sure they're going to stay the night there?"

"Sure. They were already making fires and rowing over soft places to bed down."

"Anybody see you?"

"*Them* see *me* if I didn't want 'em to?" Thomas snorted with a craftsman's offended pride. "I went all around 'em, and they aren't even worried enough to have guards out."

It was still light, but dusk had already arrived there under the trees, and the birds cheeped with that aloofness they manifest at day's end only. "That's fine," Conan said. "We'll move up a couple of miles or so, then eat. By that time it'll be dark, and we'll see what can be done to educate them."

Thomas took us as near to our quarry as he thought feasible. Then while the meal was being prepared he went over the remaining ground once more to make certain that he could guide us through the imminent night.

"They're making more racket than a herd of hogs," he chuckled when he returned.

I grunted, remembering. One of the hardest things that I had had to bear during my sojourn with those people was that there was never a moment of silence among them. Once they were settled around their fire or fires it would be no trick to steal upon them. Nevertheless, we waited the little while till full dark before we got under way.

Thomas went first, with Conan, then myself and the others in single file behind. We could see well enough to keep from stumbling or bumping into each other, and

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the hunter, spotting his landmarks and signs with amazing precision and swiftness, led us at a fair rate of speed.

After a little, though, he was relieved of the necessity of exercizing his skill. Faintly at first but soon drowning out all other noises of the forest, we could hear the voices of the outlaws. Bred to yelling each other down, they invariably spoke several times more loudly than need be, and in harsh, far-carrying tones.

THIS notwithstanding, we did not grow careless. On the contrary we slowed our rate of advance, and if one of us happened to cause any extra sharp snapping of branches we all halted, trusting that thus the sound would seem to blend with the inevitable cracklings and rustlings of any forest. Then at last we caught sight of their fires, two huge ones.

"See which one Piers has settled down by," Conan whispered, and once more the woodsman was off, marvelous in his silence. We waited, listening to the mouthings of the unsuspecting folk ahead. They were making an ugly, patternless racket, and from where we stood it sounded all but inhuman.

"Now I know why a hawk dives down on a bunch of magpies," I muttered to Conan. "It's just to shut 'em up for a minute."

"Some of these magpies will shut up for a long time," he said grimly.

A minute later Thomas stole out of a shadow. "He's by the fire to the right," he reported.

In relation to our position it was the furthest away, and we set patiently about the task of reaching an attacking point. From then on our orders were to keep together and work as near to the outlaws as possible.

For a while I had hopes that we would be on them before they knew it, but one of the men tripped and fell headlong when we were still about fifty yards short.

They hushed instantly, and my skin prickled with a hunter's excitement as Piers himself called: "Hey! Who's there?"

Conan was not the man to give him a chance to find out by easy degrees. "At 'em!" he yelled, slamming through the underbrush. We obeyed as well as circumstances would permit, and after a few strides advancing wasn't hard. The firelight picked out obstacles for us, and I can recall stumbling only once.

Of course, what with dodging trees, we couldn't go at top speed, but we were still able to reach them before they were sure what they were going to do. Or rather before Piers was sure what he was going to do.

Most of them followed the animal instinct of their kind to duck for cover first and ascertain the exact extent of the danger later. There was much squawking and shrieking as women chivvied their young into the dark, cursing betimes as men shoved past them.

Piers and a few of his fellows had tried to organize resistance, but when they found nobody was listening to them they also turned to escape. It was too late to avoid us then, though. We were already in their camp and in full career, while they were just getting in motion.

Conan cut down one man from behind, and as the others whirled on us desperately, I leaped past him to get at Piers. I had promised myself that I would do that as soon as I knew we were on his trail.

His eyes told me that he recognized me, but for once he had no time for words. There was great strength in that frame of his, but he was not a skilled swordsman. The rest of the skirmish was over, but Conan knew that I wanted to handle this fellow myself.

"But don't kill him, brother," he begged. "I have something for him."

Acquiescing, I turned Piers and worked him toward the soaring fire. He still hacked manfully until the intense heat began to singe and blister him. Then he suddenly dropped his blade with a groan.

"Get him!" Conan barked and four men sprang to drag him to a cooler spot.

Whistling to himself, Conan sauntered around the fire, his face turned up to the

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illuminated branches. "Bring him here," he ordered; and Piers, wondering and sullen, was hustled before him.

"I've learned to tell you from a pig," Conan said, smiling in a way that the outlaw couldn't have enjoyed. "Isn't that nice?"

He stretched out his hand, and Jean gave him a coiled leather rope. Piers howled and almost broke loose by his frantic squirming, but additional hands made sure of him and tied his arms behind his back. Conan, meanwhile paid no attention but, still smiling, carefully fashioned a noose.

"Up, Thomas," he said quietly, handing the coil to the woodsman. "Boost him, two of you."

In a moment Piers interrupted his own ravenings with a squeal as the noose dropped down from the branch to hang level with his eyes. Conan swept it roughly over the outlaw's head.

"Hoist!" he commanded.

If there were any there who felt compassion for him I wasn't one of them. "He kicks a lot," I said critically.

It was quite true, too.

"He isn't used to it yet," Conan explained. "He'll get over it pretty soon."

He did, and we left him aloft for his fellows to see and think about.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

The Man Who Went to Hell

by THEODORE ROSCOE

In this week's Detective Fiction Weekly

DON DIAVOLO

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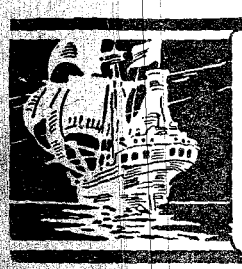

Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint

WE'VE been crowded for several weeks, with Looking Ahead jammed up against our windpipe; and now when we get the chance to breathe and talk, we just sit panting foolishly. With an inch of space to fill we had splendid ideas—matters of consequence to discuss—but they have curiously vanished. Maybe they never were there anyhow.

We could talk about the weather, but here in New York it is something we are trying to forget. We might consider the state of the world, but who in his right mind would want to do that? So (probably to your relief) we will turn now to the correspondence; and perhaps next week will find us at ease again, with our voice back.

Here's a reader who has been following the career of ARGOSY for forty years. It is deeply satisfying to find him so appreciative, and we hope not to fail him in the considerable trust he places upon us.

T. H. NICHOLAS

Thanks for around forty years of good reading. From early teens to now I have read your magazine. I have no criticisms to offer. There are issues that I will not read more than one story and others I will read the entire contents. I have seen magazines disappear from circulation during these years which I enjoyed reading and I appreciate the ARGOSY keeping the old ship afloat during all of this time.

I realize that it is becoming increasingly difficult to entertain and interest people. The Lecture Courses, The Chautauqua and other entertainments which the American people used to enjoy have gone from us. One lady asked me the other day, "What will interest people? They will not even look up to see a plane." I did not attempt to answer her.

I attended the Baccalaureate program of our high school last Sunday evening and the minister preached one of the most depressing sermons I have ever heard. There was little held out for almost a hundred boys and girls who were completing their twelve years of school. This is indeed a depressing time and many people are wondering if our methods are right.

This is a conservative mid-western community, lawabiding, churchgoing people, who believe in God and American institutions. They have been having a hard pull, but they have not lost faith either in God or their country. Magazines, regardless of price, owe it to the people of their country that their pages contain nothing which will cause people to lose that faith.

On your desk letters must come from all parts of our country and from foreign lands. Just put this letter away with those who have appreciated your efforts for more years than I like to think about.

SAVANNAH, MO.

THE next letter has a point to make that is rather unusual: The writer did not enjoy Charles Warren's "Bugles Are for Soldiers." Most people did, as any reader of this department knows; but we would have been suspicious of the story if there hadn't been some criticism of it. Anyhow, there's a letter below this one which sounds the familiar salute to Mr. Warren. First, however:

ARTHUR STRAW

I call you Brother in Travail after reading "Bugles Are for Soldiers". I can feel for anyone that has to take the brunt from a story such as that one.

I never have written to you before because I thought writing was for dopes and nincompoops. But maybe I am developing into one after reading the ARGOSY for twenty-two years.

I don't mind reading fantastic stories but I do want a writer to stick to a semblance of truth when he writes of Indians. I except him to understand that which he writes about.

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I kept on reading hoping against hope that he would tell it right.

The ARGOSY is a magazine that I thought couldn't have such an author cram such a story down its throat.

Now for the ones that click with me. They are fantastic stories of Mars, and every one dealing in pure fiction.

As I write this I wonder if you will reprint a story I read about 1920 or '21. The title I believe was "The Pyramid of Iron". I am not sure that I ever finished it. I believe that not only myself but many more of the readers would enjoy that sort of thing.

JACKSON, MICHIGAN

B. L. STEINMETZ

Stanley Haynes wrote you his choice for the best novel of the year up to 1939—my choice for 1940 is "Bugles Are for Soldiers". I hope to see a lot more of C. M. Warren.

WHEELING, W. VA.

Well—we hope to give you more fantasy and more Warren, too.

AND now for a reader who hides behind a whimsical sort of anonymity. He's anxious to see the return of certain established writers. Well, if he will follow ARGOSY closely for the next few months he ought to be fairly satisfied.

G. LUCK

Well, well! To find three serials in ARGOSY again will indeed be a pleasant improvement. (There used to be four.) Lately I've been expecting, instead, to see the magazine reduced to two covers and a title page.

It was ARGOSY's blue-ribbon book serials that made its reputation and me an avid reader. Short stories are far too plentiful elsewhere.

I should like to see more of the established authors in the magazine. Mason, Bedford-Jones, G. Bruce, Gery, Cummings are still active in the pulp field but long absent from ARGOSY. Remember them? Will Edgar Rice Burroughs favor us this year with a story? I sincerely hope so. (The name is fictitious.)

LOOKING AHEAD!

FLIGHT TO SINGAPORE

He's here again, for a whirl at the hot spots of the Malay States and the buried temples of Kammorirri—and rubies in fistfuls, no less. Who but Prince Mike, the Princeton-educatd son of the last remaining independent Oriental potentate; the amiable little scrapper who flies the only plane in the Sultan's bailiwick, and leaves the smart boys picking themselves off the floor behind him. Prince Mike, folks, returning with the devoted American ex-flatfoot who is his bodyguard, in a swell complete short novel by

DONALD BARR CHIDSEY

FIRST CATCH YOUR BEAVER

Another old friend of Argosy readers, Wayne McCloud of Dabbit Run, is stuck with bloodhounds and a seventeen-year-old cowboy. Both are disturbing no end. Even with seven different creeks to wade, no man could pull himslf out of this without knowing the habits of those industrious animals that cut down trees to make dams. Smart outdoor detective work, in a short story by

JIM KJELGAARD

COMING IN NEXT WEEK'S ARGOSY—AUGUST 3

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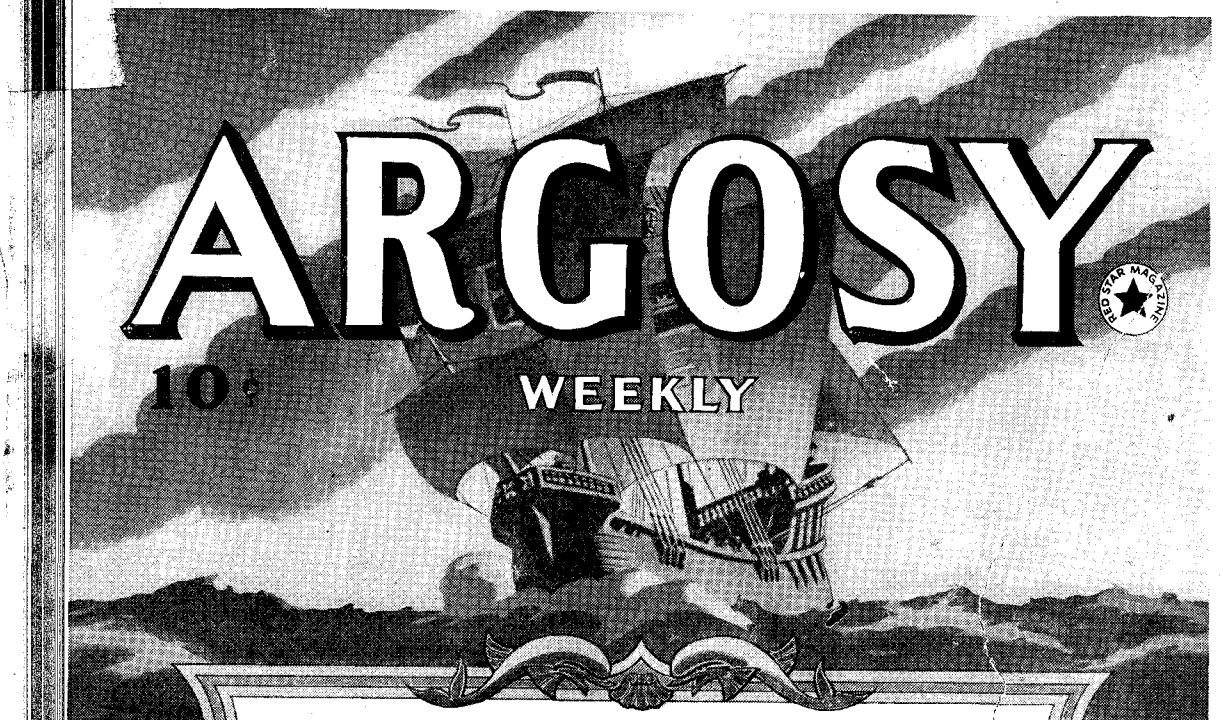

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